

Essential Practices in Early Literacy

for K–2 Multilingual Learners

Reimagining how leaders lay the foundation for developing strong readers

We know how to teach children to read.

Literacy in English is essential to achievement in every academic subject—and to educational and economic opportunities beyond schooling.¹ However, learning and developing as a reader are more complicated in a language the reader is simultaneously learning to speak and understand.

Today, nearly five million children in U.S. public schools are classified as English learners (ELs),² and ELs are the fastest-growing student population in the country.³ Because publicly available data indicate that multilingual learners (MLs)* perpetually lag behind their native English-speaking peers academically,⁴ teaching language-minority students to read and write well in English presents an urgent challenge to the nation's schools.

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. What we know about effective literacy instruction for non-MLs offers us a foundation for effective early literacy instruction for MLs.

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

*Federal law uses a very technical definition for students learning English referred to as “English learners.” School districts use the federal definition for compliance and accountability purposes and therefore collect data according to those components. Instruction Partners intentionally uses the term “multilingual learners” to acknowledge students developing proficiency in a new language while honoring their skills and competencies in their current language(s) and to support the needs of students who speak dialects and variations of English not represented in academic standards and materials (who are not identified as English learners according to the federal definition).



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. We then explored the literature and research through the lens of centering MLs,⁵ devoting thought and attention to a thorough analysis of the structures and practices that need to be in place at the instructional and system levels to be sure early literacy instruction moves MLs through the continuum of skills that they need to acquire to be proficient readers.

The result: A suggested set of five essential practices for building an effective early literacy system that centers multilingual learners, 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 MLs are reading proficiently in English by the time they enter 3rd grade.

We understand that there are certain circumstances that will impact this timeline—for example, how recently the student was introduced to English—and thus should be considered when setting individual student goals. In addition, teachers and leaders must pay attention to MLs' level of English language proficiency as that will dictate the extent to which modified instructional and system-level practices might be needed and/or appropriate.⁶

To refine our understanding of the practices that best serve MLs, we are field testing what we learn to help identify key moves maximizing ML reading progress, specifically in response to missed learning opportunities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We will also continue learning with and collecting data from schools and systems as well as connecting with researchers, scholars, and practitioners dedicated to effective literacy instruction for MLs.



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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)⁷

How to use the essential practices that center multilingual learners

We encourage leadership teams who wish to center MLs in early literacy instruction to review all five essential practices, determine which practices are already being implemented within their current early literacy system, and identify which practices have not yet been 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 **diagnostic self-evaluation tool** to gauge the degree to which these elements are already in place.
3. Return to this document 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 MLs.

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





Essential Practice #1

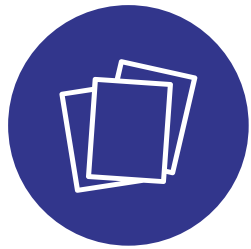
Vision

Establish a vision for early literacy instruction that is anchored in the science of reading,* research-informed strategies for multilingual learners, and the belief that multilingual learners can and will successfully engage with grade-level complex text as determined by state learning standards by the time they enter 3rd grade.

Indicators

- The school system has a written vision for early literacy that clearly communicates:
 - a commitment to using an explicit and systematic approach to foundational skills instruction;
 - the mindset that MLs can engage with grade-level complex text as determined by standards by the time they enter 3rd grade;
 - a focus on leveraging and building students' assets, including their primary languages, language dialects, and/or language varieties; and
 - a commitment to simultaneous language (oral, vocabulary, comprehension) and foundational reading skills development.
- All stakeholders have a clear understanding of the vision, including their individual role in working towards it, 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.



Essential Practice #2

Materials

Use standards-aligned and coherent materials effectively to facilitate data-driven instruction anchored in the science of reading and research-informed strategies for multilingual learners.

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.
- Curriculum and materials are responsive to and reflective of MLs' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and skills. When Tier 1 curriculum and materials are not representative of the students or their needs, considerations are made regarding how to create or amplify opportunities that are responsive to and reflective of ML identities.

- Supplemental materials and connected instruction build in connections to students' home languages through bridging strategies (e.g., purposeful comparisons of two languages in order to extract similarities and differences between the two). Review the [classroom strategies resource](#) for examples.
- There is a strategic approach to leveraging Tier 1 curricular materials and instructional practices in service of supporting foundational skills development within language development program service times (e.g., pull-out English as a Second Language [ESL] support).





Essential Practice #3

Data

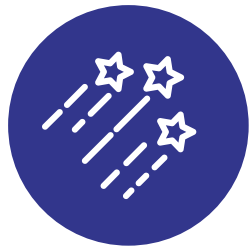
Use quality data and assessment resources consistently, cohesively, and strategically to drive instructional decision-making for all students, with an intentional focus on multilingual learners.

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 (e.g., ML identifier, language proficiency level) 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.
- Assessment and evaluation honor MLs' primary languages and current English proficiency levels. There is a written policy to ensure that MLs are not penalized for current proficiency level and/or imprecise articulation when the difference can be explained by home language influence. Review the classroom strategies resource for more information and examples.

*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 stakeholders providing ML support analyze student data and collaboratively plan for how materials will be strategically used to support students' foundational skills development, including what enhancements might be needed to center the needs of MLs.
- 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;
 - best practices for developing language and literacy simultaneously; and
 - implementing culturally and linguistically responsive practices.





Essential Practice #5

Time

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.
- School and system schedules provide the appropriate amount of time within a Language Instruction Educational Program (LIEP) such as English Language Development (ELD) or bilingual education programs and services.
- 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 and who support ML literacy and language development allocate time to receive regular (e.g., weekly or biweekly), ongoing professional learning.
- Teachers, coaches, and leaders reserve time to engage in data cycles and collaboratively plan the best ways to integrate foundational literacy and language development instruction.

Resources

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2. Office of English Language Acquisition, “Profile of English Learners in the United States,” United States Department of Education (January 2021), https://ncela.ed.gov/sites/default/files/fast_facts/DEL4.4_ELProfile_508_1.4.2021_OELA.pdf.
3. United States Department of Education, “Our Nation’s English Learners: What are Their Characteristics,” accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/el-characteristics/index.html>; Grantmakers for Education, “Educating English Language Learners: Grantmaking Strategies for Closing America’s Other Achievement Gap,” April 2013, https://edfunders.org/sites/default/files/Educating%20English%20Language%20Learners_April%202013.pdf.
4. United States Department of Education, “Academic Performance and Outcomes for English Language Learners,” accessed January 18, 2022, <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/el-outcomes/index.html>.
5. In addition to the previously cited research, the following research resources informed our development of the essential practices:
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- Barbara Foorman, Michael Coyne, Carolyn A. Denton, Joseph Dimina, Lynda Hayes, Laura Justice, Warnick Lewis, and Richard Wagner, *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten through 3rd Grade* (NCEE 2016-4008, Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2016), accessed December 2, 2021, https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_040717.pdf.
- Corey Mitchell, “The Nation’s English-Learner Population Has Surged: 3 Things to Know,” EdWeek, February 18, 2020, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-nations-english-learner-population-has-surged-3-things-to-know/2020/02>.
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- Emily Rodgers, Jerome V. D’Agostino, Sinéad J. Harmey, Robert H. Kelley, and Katherine Brownfield, “Examining the Nature of Scaffolding in an Early Literacy Intervention,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2016): 345–360, accessed December 2020, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43999163>.
- Gloria Stewner-Manzanares, “The Bilingual Education Act: Twenty Years Later,” *New Focus: The National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education*, no. 6 (1988): 1–10, https://ncela.ed.gov/files/rcd/BE021037/Fall88_6.pdf.
- Jose M. Castillo, Amanda L. March, Kevin M. Stockslager, and Constance V. Hines, “Measuring Educators’ Perceptions of Their Skills Relative to Response to Intervention: A Psychometric Study of a Survey Tool,” *Assessment for Effective Intervention* 41, no. 2 (2016): 94–108, accessed November 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1534508415616583>.
- Joseph K. Torgesen, “Avoiding the Devastating Downward Spiral: The Evidence That Early Intervention Prevents Reading Failure,” *American Educator* 28, no. 3 (2004): 6–9, 12–13, 17–19.
- 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/>.

- Lisa Lim, Joanne Arciuli, Natalie Munro, and Linda Cupples, “Using the MULTILIT Literacy Instruction Program with Children Who Have Down Syndrome,” *Reading and Writing* 32, no. 9 (2019): 2179–2200, accessed December 2, 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331938309_Using_the_MULTILIT_literacy_instruction_program_with_children_who_have_Down_syndrome.
- Louisa C. Moats, “Teaching Reading is Rocket Science, 2020: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able to Do,” American Federation of Teachers (2020), accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/moats.pdf>.
- The Nation’s Report Card, “NAEP Report Card: Reading [Grade 4],” released 2019, accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/scores/?grade=4>.
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- ° Zadiee Stavely, “Why phonics instruction is not enough for English learners,” EdSource, September 24, 2021, <https://edsource.org/2021/why-phonics-instruction-is-not-enough-for-english-learners/661487>.
- 6. Claude Goldenberg, “Reading Wars, Reading Science, and English Learners,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 55, no. S1 (2020): S131–S144, doi:10.1002/rrq.340.
- 7. Moats, 9.

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

