

A Call to Action:

The state of early literacy in New York



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Introduction

Literacy, the ability to read, write, speak, and listen, is a powerful tool for learning, growth, and personal development. The benefits of being fully literate go well beyond increased academic performance, providing the foundation for full participation in a democratic society. In today's information-rich world, literacy provides the tools to distinguish between fact and fiction, speak and write across lines of difference, and empathize with the experiences of others to help solve the world's most pressing challenges.

Reading, the ability to make meaning from print, is an essential component of literacy, with significant implications for New York, including employment, poverty reduction, public safety, and health outcomes. From an education standpoint, reading proficiently by

the end of third grade is the most important indicator of **future student success**, with students not reading proficiently by the end of third grade four times more likely to drop out of school. **This rate doubles for Black and Latinx students living in poverty.** As a result, learning to read is a fundamental human right and one of the most important equity and social justice issues facing our state and nation.

Yet too many New York students are denied the right to read, especially students of color and those from low-income backgrounds. And despite recent student outcome data and the impact of pandemic-related school closures on reading skills, state and local leaders have yet to boldly address the issue with deliberate urgency.

Consider the facts about student achievement in reading for New York:

46% 

of all third graders scored proficient in English language arts (ELA) on the 2021-22 New York State Assessment

35% 

of third graders from low-income backgrounds were proficient in ELA on the 2021-22 New York State Assessment

The federal National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that

42% of fourth grade students

scored Below Basic – the lowest NAEP performance level

New York ranks

37th 

in fourth grade NAEP reading scores, trailing Florida in fourth, New Jersey in sixth, and Mississippi in 22nd

ONLY 33% 

of NYS teacher preparation programs teach the science of reading or evidence-based teaching methods to aspiring teachers

The three cities in New York with the highest concentrations of child poverty – Rochester, Syracuse, and Buffalo – also have some of the lowest third grade proficiency rates on state ELA assessments

Rochester

11% 

Syracuse

13% 

Buffalo

24% 

Assessment scores are not a complete measure of what students know and are able to do; however, they provide an objective and comparative view of student achievement at the school, district, and state levels. Taken together, these data point to a literacy crisis that has the potential to limit the future success of students, families, schools, and communities in New York. The literacy crisis has the potential to worsen if we do not work to ensure that all children have foundational reading skills and well-prepared educators who use evidence-based curriculum.

Fortunately, there are solutions to address this crisis.

Across the nation, state and school districts are bridging the gap between education policy and practice by leveraging decades of research about how

students learn to read. This research, often called the science of reading, is a robust and interdisciplinary body of knowledge that is recentering our nation's approach to reading instruction. Twenty-six states, including Connecticut, Michigan, and Virginia, **passed legislation** since 2019 that either requires or incentivizes schools and teacher preparation programs to provide evidence-based literacy instruction aligned with the science of reading.

Despite lagging student outcomes and historic federal and state investments in education, New York has yet to join the national movement. Thus, The Education Trust–New York decided to embark on a year-long study of New York's early literacy landscape, with the goal of spurring action — in policy and practice — at the state and local levels.



Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimage

Over the last year, Ed Trust–NY conducted a comprehensive mixed-methods study of the field that included a literature review, statewide polling, focus groups, surveys, and interviews with key stakeholders across the state. The findings, highlighted in this report, revealed the following:

- State leadership, including the New York State Department of Education, Board of Regents, the Governor’s Office, and the Legislature, have not centered early literacy, the science of reading, or the reading crisis in their priorities or initiatives.
- New York’s approach to local education control results in many school districts using non-evidence-based reading curriculum in grades K-5, some of which are proven to be ineffective in teaching students how to read.
- Parents overwhelmingly support an increased state and local focus on the science of reading, including policy changes, and want more transparency and support from schools to aid their young readers.
- Teachers are generally supportive of the science of reading and see the impact of poor reading skills on their students in elementary, middle, and high school.
- Students understand the link between reading and future success, and acknowledge that mental health concerns, being an English language learner, and lacking family support can make reading proficiency difficult for some students.
- Teacher preparation programs are a major obstacle to improved reading outcomes with most new teachers not being trained in the science of reading or how to use evidence-based literacy instructional resources in the classroom.
- Experts across the state and nation believe that New York is in desperate need of an increased focus on evidence-based literacy instruction.
- Many district leaders would welcome more guidance from the state on how to implement the science of reading and evidence-based instruction in their schools.

Sharing and understanding the implications of these findings are the first steps in New York’s journey toward better reading outcomes and a brighter future for students, schools, and communities across New York. Ed Trust–NY and its partners will leverage these findings and recommendations to build a movement toward systemic changes in reading instruction across across New York’s P-20 system of education.



Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimage

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Reading and The Belief Gap

Before diving into instructional reforms and policy possibilities, New York’s ecosystem of education leaders, advocates, and policymakers must name, own, and address a widening belief gap that normalizes low expectations and accepts poor reading outcomes, particularly for students of color and those from low-income backgrounds. Low reading scores were commonplace in New York schools long before the pandemic, with little action or outrage to address the issue from state and local leaders.

New York’s misguided approach is egregious given **that 95%** of ALL elementary students – regardless of background – are cognitively capable of learning to

read when they receive sufficient direct instruction on the foundational skills of reading. Yet, in New York, data shows the inverse – with 95% of students at some schools NOT reading proficiently and outcomes well below the 95% threshold, even amongst the highest performing schools.

Aligning classroom practice with the science of reading is an essential step to better reading outcomes. However, it must be accompanied by a seismic shift in the beliefs of education stakeholders that all students can read with well-prepared educators, high-quality curriculum, effective instruction, and learning support.



Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUImage

Science of Reading – What we know about how kids learn to read

The Reading League, a national Syracuse-based organization focused on scientific-aligned reading instruction **defines** the science of reading (SOR) as: “...a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing. This research has been conducted over the last five decades across the world, and it is derived from thousands of studies conducted in multiple languages. The science of reading has culminated in a preponderance of evidence to inform how proficient reading and writing develop; why some have difficulty; and how we can most effectively assess and teach and, therefore, improve student outcomes through prevention of and intervention for reading difficulties.”

The science of reading is just that – science.

The science of reading is anchored by research in cognitive psychology, communication sciences, developmental psychology, education, special education, implementation science, linguistics, neuroscience, and school psychology. The research behind the science of reading has been around for over fifty years, yet its emergence as a national movement is recent, due in part to the work of journalists like Emily Hanford whose reporting **shines a light** on ineffective reading instruction across the nation.

The research that makes up the science of reading builds on the findings of the **National Reading Panel** (NRP), a group of experts in the fields of psychology, education, and reading that was convened by Congress in 1997 to evaluate research on the teaching of reading and to make recommendations for improving literacy instruction in schools.

The NRP found that effective reading instruction requires attention to scientific evidence about how children learn to read and the most effective methods for teaching reading. Their report highlighted the

importance of what is known as the five pillars of reading instruction, widely recognized as essential elements of effective reading instruction and the basis of most evidence-based reading curriculum.

The five pillars which make up the science of reading are:

- **Phonics:** The ability to associate sounds with letters and blend them together to form words.
- **Phonemic Awareness:** The ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words.
- **Fluency:** The ability to read quickly and accurately with appropriate expression.
- **Vocabulary:** The knowledge of words and their meanings.
- **Comprehension:** The ability to understand and make meaning from what is read.

The science of reading shows that teaching phonics explicitly and systematically is critical to developing the foundational skills for most children to become proficient readers. However, as noted by the NRP, **the science of reading is more than just phonics and includes instruction in vocabulary, comprehension, and knowledge building, among other topics.**

“Knowledge building” in particular, is a vital component of evidence-based literacy instruction because it underpins reading comprehension, by helping students make sense of words and text.

Another way to understand the science of reading is through **The Simple View of Reading**, empirically validated by over **150 scientific studies**. The Simple View of Reading shows that reading comprehension has two components — word recognition or decoding and language comprehension. Learning to read requires sounding out and recognizing words — decoding — and making meaning of the words and sentences heard

— language comprehension. Weakness in either of these skills diminishes comprehension.

Finally, the science of reading is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach and provides educators with the tools

and flexibility to both provide culturally responsive-sustaining education and meet the unique needs of individual students. This includes English and multi-language learners, and New York can learn much from work happening in **California** on this issue.



The Science of Reading and Teacher Preparation

A **2020 study** by the National Center for Teacher Quality (NCTQ) reviewed the reading-related course and degree requirements across schools of education and found that only some programs provide opportunities for future teachers to learn the science

of reading or receive training in evidence-based instruction strategies. Most teacher preparation programs in New York do not align teacher education with the science of reading. The 2020 NCTQ study found that across New York:

67% 
of the state’s **76** traditional preparation programs do not teach the reading methods most likely to be effective with the highest number of students.

The average score earned by New York’s programs fell below the national average, with New York ranking **43rd**  nationally.

Only **nine programs** earned an “A” rating, while **47 programs** earned a “D” or “F” rating.

At the same time, many teacher-licensing exams across the country do not differentiate between early literacy, literacy in special education, or secondary literacy. In addition, only a few teacher preparation programs require candidates to demonstrate knowledge of the five pillars of reading instruction. As a result, many teachers are never prepared to effectively teach reading, making it difficult for students to access the science of reading in

classrooms and ultimately playing a vital role in the nation’s poor reading outcomes.

Further, in response to pandemic teacher shortages, The New York State Education Department (NYSED) loosened requirements to earn a reading teacher certificate in 2022. NYSED also lowered the number of training hours required to receive a teaching credential in reading from 100 to 50.

Student Reading Outcomes in New York

As the pandemic ravaged New York State and the nation, many school leaders and advocates were concerned about the impact of school closures on student learning. In the fall of 2022, new state, federal, and local data revealed what many feared – students across the nation are challenged to read. Assessment scores fell significantly. Sadly, students of color and those living in poverty experienced high rates of

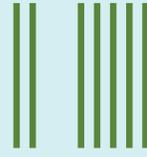
illness and death and more prolonged school closures — exacerbating poor reading outcomes that were present before the pandemic.

The New York Equity Coalition noted several alarming findings in its report titled **Pandemic Proficiency**, including:

New York’s third and fourth grade ELA proficiency declined **6%** since 2019. This decline is not surprising since the first three years of school are critical to building foundational reading skills, and many students in these grades missed significant amounts of instructional time.



There is a consistent and continued gap between the ELA performance of students from low-income households compared to non-low-income households.



37%	proficient
61%	proficient

- students from low-income households
- students from non-low-income households

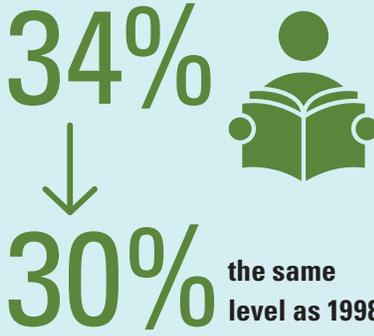
There are alarmingly wide ELA proficiency gaps between

36%	Black
36%	Latinx
52%	White
69%	Asian / Pacific Islander

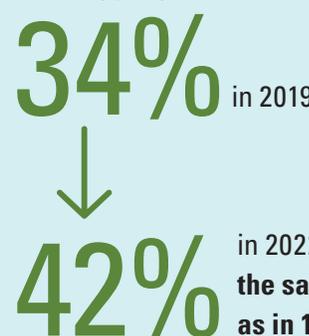


Federal data from the 2022 **National Assessment of Educational Progress** confirmed New York’s state-level data:

New York’s fourth grade student proficiency rate in reading dropped from **34%** to **30%** the same level as 1998.



The number of New York fourth grade students scoring Below Basic (the lowest level) on NAEP reading jumped from **34%** in 2019 to **42%** in 2022, the same level as in 1998.



Percentage of New York Black fourth graders scored proficient on the NAEP reading assessment.

14%	Black
20%	Latinx
38%	White
49%	Asian



Local data reveal similar trends. For example, **Rochester City School District data** in 2021-22 showed

8% of students in grades K-8 reading at grade level. 

63%  of students measuring at least two grades below grade level.

Of Rochester's students in fourth grade,

52% 

measured **three or more grade levels** behind – *double the rate of similar urban schools across the nation.*

Student assessment results provide a limited understanding of the issues, and many students and schools are making progress. A great deal of schools experience challenges with student attendance, engagement, mental health, and school safety, which

can track closely with student reading proficiency, underscoring how reading skills impact school culture and student well-being. These data point to a set of risks New York is well-equipped to mitigate through improved reading instruction.



EARLY LITERACY IN NEW YORK

To help build a deeper understanding of the field beyond the assessment scores, Ed Trust–NY embarked upon a comprehensive review of policy and practice that included:

- A review of current New York state policies on K-5 reading.
- A survey of New York state school districts designed to understand what K-5 literacy curricula and other instructional resources are in use.
- A statewide poll of parents focused on literacy and the science of reading.
- An online focus group of teachers across the state focused on literacy and the science of reading.
- In-person and online focus groups about literacy with middle and high school students in New York City and Rochester.
- Analysis of the 2020 National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) Teacher Prep Review.
- Interviews with over 50 distinguished education stakeholders and literacy experts.

State Education and Early Literacy

The New York State Department of Education (NYSED) focuses on early literacy in various ways, including through its Office of Early Learning. However, early literacy is not a top priority statewide, particularly in comparison to other states.

To its credit, NYSED’s Next Generation ELA standards, which took effect in the 2022-23 school year, are aligned with the science of reading, and include a focus on phonics, phonological awareness, and fluency; however, many districts throughout the state have yet to adopt and implement instruction using the Next Generation Learning Standards (NGLS). NYSED’s **Early Literacy Profile** supports districts in fully adopting the standards. The tool allows educators to assess and track student progress in developing early literacy skills, including phonological awareness. The results inform instructional practice and design supports for students with deficiencies. Additionally, NYSED is in the process of developing literacy guidance for Universal Pre-K (UPK) and K-3 and plans to host a summit on P-3 literacy later in 2023

that features experts from Harvard University fluent in the science of reading.

While these tools are aligned to the science of reading, it is unclear if and how districts are using them to improve reading outcomes. Furthermore, since NYSED avoids articulating an ideology or particular instructional approach to reading, decisions are left to local school districts, resulting in the frequent use of non-evidence-based resources.

State leaders, including the Board of Regents, State Education Commissioner, Governor, and Legislators, have not used their power and influence to prioritize literacy. Instead, New York’s leadership is focusing on issues that distract from the literacy crisis like graduation requirements, school funding, and the charter school debate. While several bills aligned with the science of reading have been recently introduced in the Legislature, led by Assembly Member Robert Carroll, there is not widespread understanding of the pervasiveness of the crisis and the risks that we face should we fail to address it.

Early Literacy in Local School Districts

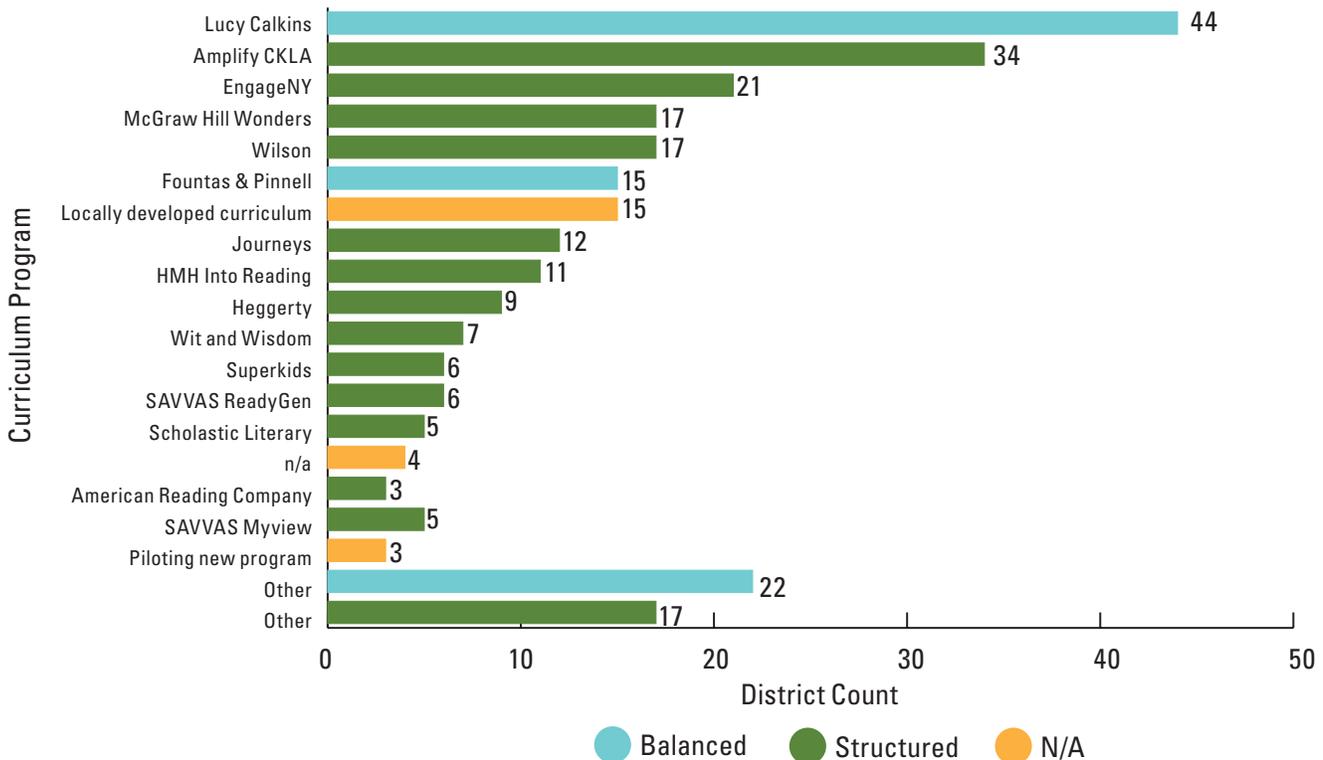
Ed Trust–NY surveyed the 688 school districts in New York to better understand how districts across the state teach reading to K-5 students. The survey focused on understanding how the **reading wars**, a long-standing debate over how best to teach children to read, are impacting curriculum use.

As of April 2023, over 250 of New York’s 688 school districts replied to the survey. The results paint a complex and uneven picture of literacy curricula alignment with the science of reading, although there are signs of progress as significantly more districts are using structured literacy curriculum:

- Lucy Calkins’s Units of Study is the most used curriculum, while Fountas and Pinnell is the seventh most used. These curricula represent a body of resources known as balanced literacy, which has been proven to be non-evidence based and, therefore, **ineffective by many reading experts nationwide**.

- Amplify CKLA, a structured literacy program aligned with the science of reading, is the third most used curriculum. This program, which includes a strong focus on background knowledge, was recently found to have a **significant positive impact** on student reading outcomes. Other structured literacy programs such as Wilson, Engage NY, and Wonders are also among the top seven most popular curriculums.
- The second largest number of district respondents are using other curriculums not included in the district survey. These districts are often using a locally developed curriculum which may or may not be evidence-based and underscores the need for more state oversight and guidance.
- Many New York districts use a combination of balanced and structured literacy programs, which can often be ineffective and confusing to students.

K-5 Reading Curriculum Across New York State



New York’s curriculum landscape is disjointed and incoherent at best. The inconsistent use of evidence-based instructional resources points to two major issues in the field:

The reading wars refer to a debate between structured literacy, which emphasizes phonics – the sounds of letters and letter combinations, and whole language or a balanced literacy approach, which focuses on making meaning and context. Phonics advocates argue that learning to decode words is a fundamental skill enabling children to read fluently and comprehend text. Whole language advocates, however, say that children naturally learn to read by being exposed to authentic literature anchored in a belief that decoding skills will develop over time.

The current discussion in New York focuses on whether districts use balanced literacy curricula, such as Lucy Calkins Units of Study and Fountas and Pinnell, or structured literacy curricula based on the science of reading, such as Amplify CKLA and Orton-Gillingham. Units of Study, based at Teachers College in New York City, has a long history in New York State, which raises concerns from stakeholders since the program is **rated poorly by Ed Reports** and other research organizations.

Local Control in New York allows local school districts to decide their curricula. School districts make choices with very little, if any, guidance from state-level education leaders. For this reason, many different curricula are in use. Since the research is clear about the effectiveness of the five pillars of reading instruction, it is illogical for state leadership to allow incoherence and use of public funds for non-evidence based curriculum. Research has shown that a structured literacy approach with an explicit focus on phonics is most effective at teaching students to read; however, New York State has yet to guide districts in moving away from balanced literacy and putting evidence-based resources in use.

Fortunately, the New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) is forging a promising path forward. NYCPS

provides wide latitude to schools around reading curriculum and instructional choices, resulting in uneven instructional practices, non-evidence-based curricula, and weak student learning. City leadership is shifting to a focus on the science of reading, requiring schools to use supplemental phonics programs and provide professional learning opportunities to educators.

Recently, the **NYCPS** announced that beginning in the fall of 2023, elementary schools in half of the city’s 32 community school districts will be required to use one of three structured literacy reading programs: Wit & Wisdom from Great Minds; Into Reading from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; or Expeditionary Learning, from EL Education. The NYCPS is mandating full adoption in the 2024-25 school year. Narrowing the curricula choices allows the NYCPS to align professional learning to the curricula to increase efficacy, measure progress, and support educators during implementation. While the city has a great deal of work to do to ensure teachers and students are ready for this shift, it represents a critical first step toward ensuring that every child knows how to read.



VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Every New Yorker has a stake in the literacy crisis. Ed Trust–NY sought to understand the experiences and dispositions of teachers, students, and parents as it relates to reading and literary practices by conducting a comprehensive mixed-methods study, which includes a statewide poll, online, and in-person focus groups with teachers and students,

and interviews with key stakeholders. This study took a broad approach to analyzing New York’s literacy landscape, providing a platform for more inquiry into how the science of reading can be used to support students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and provide culturally responsive sustaining education.

The Role of Parents

Parents play a key role in their child’s reading success, particularly in the early years. Yet too often parents are either blamed for their child’s reading struggles or are not provided with the necessary support and resources from their community and school to help support reading development.

across the state in order to better understand parents’ views on literacy and the science of reading. The poll was designed to understand parent beliefs about student reading, parent knowledge about the curricula used in their local school district, and the types of supports needed or available to families.

In March 2023, Ed Trust–NY partnered with Global Strategy Group to poll 800 public school parents

Following are key findings from the poll:

Parental beliefs

95%

of all parents believe reading skills are essential for success in school and beyond, with Black parents more likely to strongly agree that reading skills help long-term outcomes such as career prospects and being an informed citizen.



57%

of parents believe that all students can learn to read with the proper instruction and support and

ONLY 52%

of parents believe that schools should be able to teach all students to read successfully, even if there is no involvement from their parents, with much stronger support from Black and Latinx parents on both questions.

Parents prioritize their children’s reading development but need more guidance and support from their child’s school to support reading skills. For example,

ONLY 37%

of parents had access to tutoring services through their child’s school.



When asked about who is most responsible for New York’s poor reading outcomes, parents listed **other parents** as the top choice, followed in order by **schools, teachers, and state and local officials**.



Evidence-based curriculum and the science of reading

Parents are largely unaware of how their child is being taught reading at school.

85%

of all parents are unaware of what reading curriculum their school is using, but



89%

would like to know, with Black, Latinx, and low-income parents most interested in learning about their school's curriculum choice.



81%

of parents want to know if their school is using an evidence-based approach to reading instruction.



95%

of parents believe schools should make their reading curriculum choice available to the public.



The science of reading has strong support from parents, who would like to see evidence-based reading instruction implemented in New York schools.

NEARLY 4 IN 5



parents believe the state and New York schools should adopt policies aligned with the science of reading and a similar number believe the state and districts should prioritize the use of evidence-based literacy instructional resources in schools.

93%



of parents believe the state should require the use of evidence-based reading instruction,

WHILE 90%



believe NYS should incentivize the use of evidence-based reading instruction.

91%



of parents support the alignment of teacher preparation programs with the science of reading.

80%



of parents found phonics a compelling aspect of the science of reading.

ONLY 38%



of parents had previously seen, read, or heard about the science of reading. Of those,

70%

had heard positive things,

ONLY 1%

had a negative impression.

79%



believe schools should prioritize the use of evidence-based literacy instructional resources like the science of reading and

43%



believe it should be their school's top priority, with higher percentages of Black and Latinx parents supporting this prioritization.

Additional literacy supports

94%

of all parents support the use of blended learning – combining online and in-person learning and technology – to support reading instruction,

with higher support among Black parents

65%

strongly support.



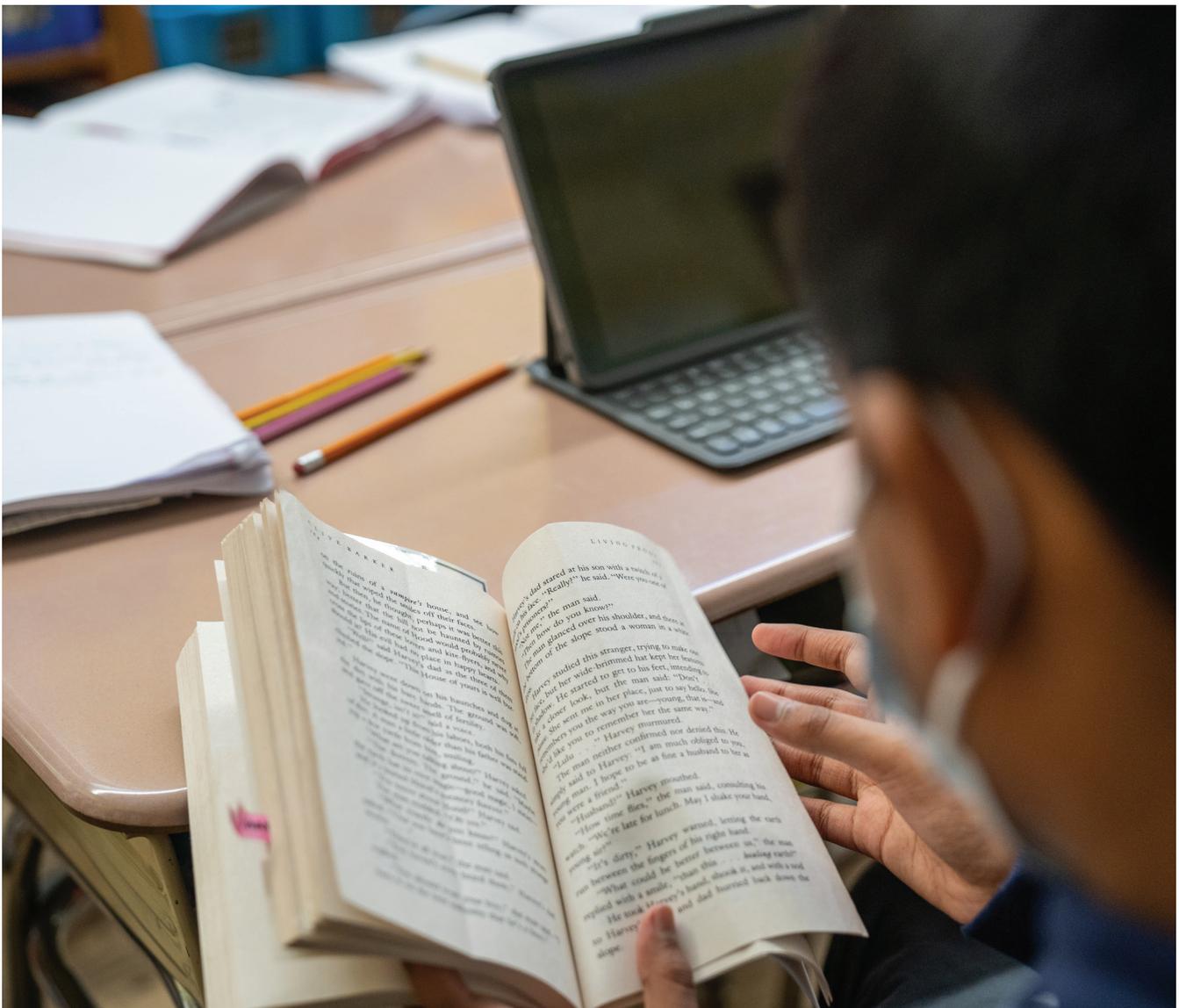
There is wide support for additional reading instruction outside of the school year and day,

94%

of parents supporting reading instruction in summer and afterschool programs and

94%

wanting more support for parents to help develop their child's reading skills.



The Role of Teachers

Better reading outcomes are dependent upon teachers who have been empowered by high-quality preparation, training, and support. Yet too many teachers enter the profession without any knowledge or training in the science of reading, making it difficult to effectively teach students how to read. The EAB **reading research brief** found that:

60% 

of elementary teachers have never been trained in strategies for teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

95% 

of early elementary classrooms spend insufficient time providing direct instruction on all English phonemes.

80% 

of early elementary teachers encourage students to use pictures or context clues to identify unfamiliar words.

As noted earlier, one of the primary reasons for this disconnect between science and the classroom is teacher preparation programs that do not instruct teachers how to implement the science of reading. Illustrating this frustration, a **Facebook group** called “Science of Reading: What I should have learned in College” now has over 200,000 members and regularly posts information about best practices in evidence-based reading instruction.

While all teachers want their students to read, shifting to an entirely new mode of reading instruction can

be difficult, particularly as the teaching profession is under increasing stress as a result of the pandemic. To better understand the view of teachers on literacy and the science of reading, Ed Trust–NY and Global Strategy Group conducted an online focus group with K-12 public school teachers across the state earlier this year. The key findings include:

New York’s teachers are feeling stretched post-pandemic. All respondents shared that teaching has become more difficult and demanding since the onset of COVID-19. Some, but not all, feel like the incorporation of technology into their classroom because of the pandemic was a positive change. For the most part, teachers feel the demands of the job and their stress levels have increased.

“

My job is so much more challenging since the pandemic. Children are lacking skills due to no in-house learning. I see the lack of socialization has made some children withdrawn. It has definitely made my job more difficult. I am trying to bring many of these children back to grade level. –Third grade teacher

“

We have to spend our own time brushing up on the procedures and practices of this new program, which is really the same as the last program, just with a new name. Teachers must attend trainings for no additional compensation, and it is exhausting. We are exhausted. –Eric, third grade teacher

Teacher respondents generally believe that many of their students are reading below grade level and feel that the most important determinant in reading success is prioritization of reading by the family.



Parents are the first reading role models that kids interact with. Parents should absolutely play a supportive role in their child's reading experiences. Parents have the power to create perspective for their children in reading. Taking their children to the local library, regularly talking to their children about their changing interests, and preferences all play a huge role in making their children effective life-long readers. – Malcolm, 2nd grade teacher

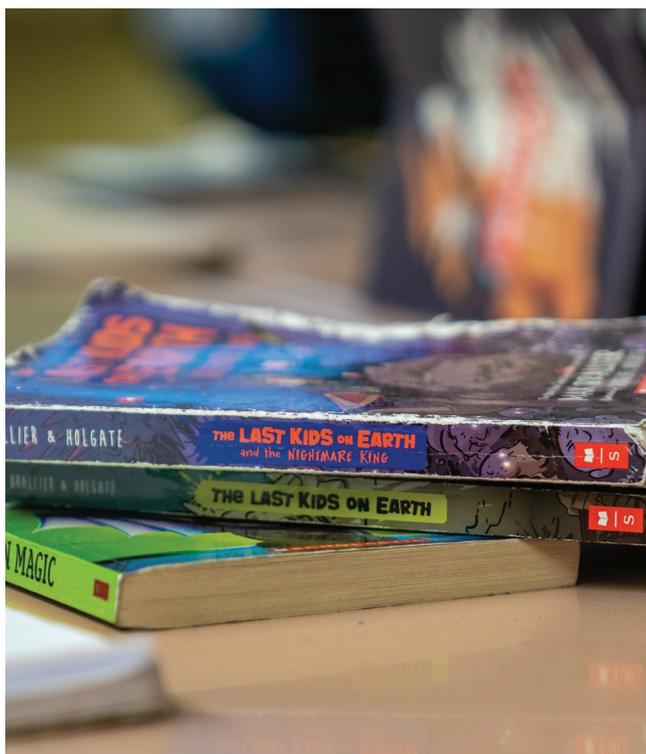
Respondents see downsides of struggling in reading throughout school, particularly on behavior and student engagement. Although some teachers feel that students who do not read at grade level can still be engaged, most teachers see adverse impacts through high school.



We keep pushing kids ahead without the reading skills and expect them to get better without an explicit and systematic phonics program. It is a huge disservice to our students, and I do think it accounts for the behavior and disengagement as the kids get older. Even math has so much emphasis on reading that students who struggle with reading cannot find a reprieve from feeling badly about themselves. – Lillian, third and fourth grade teacher



Struggles with reading absolutely affect other aspects of their education. If a student is handed a text that they do not comprehend, they will often immediately give up. In the younger students, this can cause them to grow bored and act out to entertain themselves. In my juniors and seniors, it usually means they just shut down, stare out the window, or put their head down to sleep. When they disengage, it often sets off a chain reaction that leads to worse performance on other classwork as well as with writing. – 11th and 12th grade teacher



Many respondents – particularly in secondary school – do not know much about the science of reading but seem open to the practice of evidence-based reading instruction. Knowledge of the science of reading is minimal, but teacher respondents are encouraged by the approach.

“ *...it all makes near perfect sense to me. I've seen, firsthand, how phonics leads to word recognition which in turn leads to fluency and comprehension. If a student knows how the letters work together and sound (phonics), they will then be able to use that knowledge to recognize words. The more words they recognize, the more fluent they become, which then leads to better comprehension. I would like to see an approach like this be set as a methodology for all schools across the country.*
– Third grade teacher

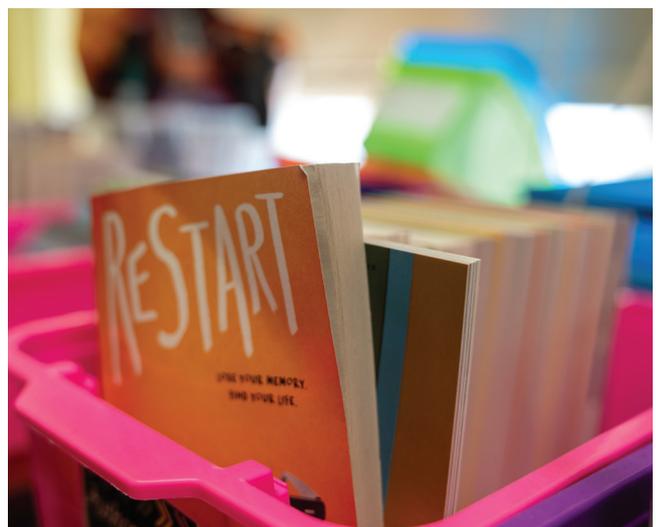
“ *We have also pushed this year to move away from balanced literacy to science of reading practices and materials. This has made tremendous improvements in my students' reading and writing abilities. I know that if they do not have a solid foundation in letters and sounds and phonemic awareness, then they will continue to struggle in future years.* – Jennifer, kindergarten teacher

Teacher respondents are split in their views on potential legislation regarding evidence-based reading instruction.

“ *I think that is a wonderful idea. If schools are by law supposed to teach these evidence-based reading programs, there would be consistency for all of the students ... I believe that it would benefit the students.*
– Kindergarten teacher

“ *I do not think it is ever a good idea for the state to mandate any type of educational program. I feel it is better to let each school meet the needs of their students in the ways that they choose.* – Seventh grade teacher

The journey to evidence-based instruction will require better understanding of how the science of reading has led to better reading outcomes for students. Improved outcomes are only possible with curriculum aligned professional learning, teacher buy-in, and support.



Student Focus Groups

Students across New York bear the brunt of the literacy crisis. When students read well, they thrive across disciplines. However, without strong foundational reading skills, students are likely to struggle in other subjects, particularly after third grade, when students shift from learning to read to reading to learn. To better understand students' views on the importance of literacy, Ed Trust–NY listened to middle and high school students who attend schools in Rochester and New York City. They shared perspectives on the importance of reading and the role of parents and schools.

The importance of reading

Most students acknowledged that reading is fundamental and makes life easier, especially as an adult.



If you cannot read, you get scammed out of a lot of things.
– NYC high school student



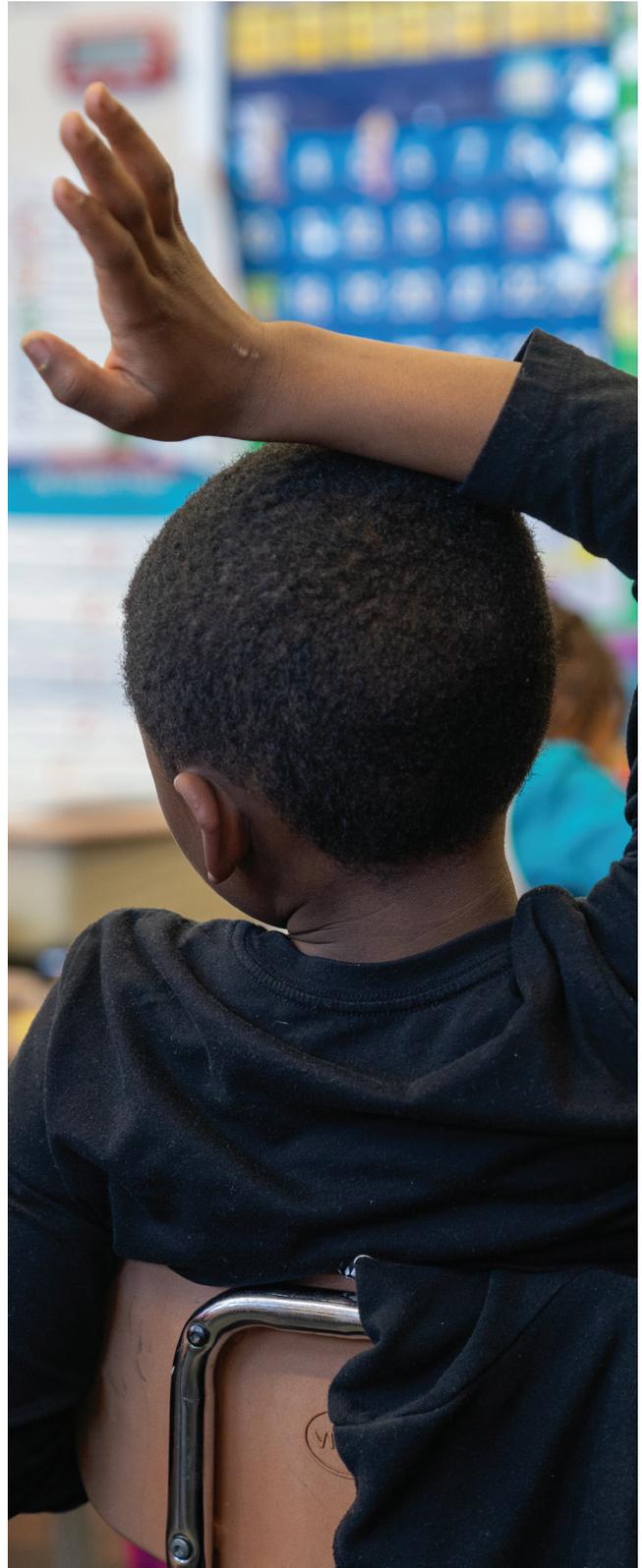
I like reading because I get to create a movie in my mind and picture the character of how I want to see them. – Rochester middle school student



What makes you a good reader? I can read a word that is ten letters long, I just don't always understand the meaning.
– NYC high school student



I really love reading; I feel like it brings me a little bit of peace.
– NYC high school student



High school students participants shared that they think a parent should help with literacy if they can, but that it is ultimately up to the school to provide support.

“ *Many or most parents cannot supply that kind of support for their children. I know a lot of people with illiterate parents — a lot of immigrant parents who brought their children here because they wanted them to have the life they did not have. I am a product of that as well. My mom and dad did not know algebra, or fractions, and stuff, so how would they help me. Their way of helping me would be bringing me here [to the U.S.]. It is the school’s responsibility [to teach literacy] because you are made, set up by the government, and funded to supply this support.* – NYC high school student

Others felt that schools needed to better support older students with reading.

“ *In elementary school and early middle school when you need help with reading and comprehension skills, it is more accessible to you. But as you grow up and go to high school and college, it becomes your responsibility to know those things. It is harder to seek help or guidance because high schools have so many students in them so it is not easy for schools to focus specifically on students’ needs for basic skills like reading.* – NYC high school student

Many students had families that helped them learn how to read, while others expressed that not all families have these resources because they may be first-generation families who immigrated to the U.S.

“ *At the time I hated this but my parents for this, but if I wanted something or wanted to go somewhere they would make me read a book and write a journal about it. I think that really improved my literacy skills.* – NYC high school student

Student participants shared that a student’s background — social-emotional well-being, learning needs, and family support — all come into play when learning how to read and being supported with literacy. Student participants who are former English language learners spoke of their experience learning to read, acknowledging that it was hard.

“ *The children I tutor — a lot of them do not speak good English and that affects their reading a lot. That is not really their fault, it is more their background. I know a lot of them speak different languages like Spanish and Arabic. I know some of them did not get the opportunity [to go to Pre-K] and it does affect their reading a lot more.*

THE SOLUTIONS

The literacy crisis is a solvable one. New York has many of the tools that will lead to better student learning. And we must act urgently and deliberately to improve instructional infrastructure statewide to — at a minimum — align with the science of

reading. While districts and schools continue to grapple with the consequences of interrupted instruction and pandemic schooling, there are two tools New York can leverage — reading technology and state leadership.

Blended Learning and Technology

Prior to the pandemic, the **average fifth grade classroom** had students with skills at seven different grade levels, ranging from second to eighth grade. Such variation presents a significant challenge for teachers, as they work to meet unique reading needs for every student. Differentiation challenges were only exacerbated by pandemic schooling.

As teachers look to support various student needs, **blended learning** — an approach to learning that combines face-to-face and online learning experiences — offers critical reinforcement. Many technologies provide real-time data that empowers teachers, students, and families with data and direction. Recent literacy-related technologies assess student aptitude, enhance differentiated instruction, scale instructional efficiency, provide meaningful data, and opportunities for family engagement. For example, current technologies can determine student reading levels, provide phonics instruction using audio and visuals and many are adaptive — adjusting to student needs throughout learning exercises.

Technology can supercharge teaching and learning. Learning technologies are helpful and most powerful when used in targeted ways aligned with high-quality curriculum and professional learning. Parents are supportive of blended learning tools. In New York, 94% of parents support the use of blended learning and technology in reading instruction, with even higher backing from Black parents. Teachers are also supportive of blended learning, particularly to help with differentiation.



Teachers say:



I think it (differentiation) is actually the biggest in-classroom challenge that I face. In a 30 student class where student reading levels range from fifth grade to post-secondary, I often feel like I am spinning plates. How do I keep the high flyers engaged and busy while I give those who are struggling the attention they deserve? Am I giving too much attention to a particular group, causing others to check out or give up completely? Who is sleeping? Who is talking to their friend? Who is taking great notes? Who is staring out the window? WHY are they doing those things? – Robert, 11th and 12th grade teacher



*Personally, I have the determination to differentiate, but not the resources. I have to spend so many hours looking for resources since our district does not provide them to us.
– Christina, kindergarten teacher*



I know this approach (blended learning) does help teachers better support students because I use it myself and can easily find things to differentiate my lesson plans. At this point, I have no concerns of technology being integrated, but actually support it 100%. – Oscar, third grade teacher



State Leadership in a Local Control System

New York State education leaders often cite local control as a barrier to their leadership in improving literacy and reading curricula and instruction. Yet, as the district survey results show, too many districts and teacher preparation programs use instructional resources that are not aligned with the evidence base. State education leaders can and must provide guidance, direction, and oversight for districts, many of which would welcome the support. State-level leadership has the potential to close widening literacy learning gaps across race, income, and geographic differences while advancing more equitable use of public funding.

Local control cannot be the reason for inaction.

NYSED, the Governor, the Board of Regents, and others can take a variety of actions while adhering to current regulations and without instituting new legislation or mandates. Nearly **thirty states** prioritize the science of reading, including many with local control systems where districts make most instructional decisions. These states have either focused on incentivizing districts to align instruction with the science of reading or shifted toward a more assertive state leadership role focused on improving poor reading outcomes through equity considerations.



Solutions in other local control states

 **Connecticut** recently passed the **“Right to Read”** Act, which created a strong state leadership role and comprehensive statewide response to the early literacy crisis. The policy requires the state to oversee all literacy efforts, including:

- Requiring districts to select from seven approved reading curriculums aligned with the science of reading and providing over \$25 million to support the purchase of new curriculum.
- Providing professional development to districts to support implementation.
- Hiring external literacy coaches to support targeted districts with implementation.

 The **Massachusetts** Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) recently released a request for proposal (RFP) called **Accelerating Literacy Learning through High-Quality Instructional Materials**. The RFP, which did not require state legislation, will:

- Support schools and districts with 50% of the purchase price of new core instructional materials for literacy.
- Pay up to the entire cost of the initial professional development for educators to implement those materials in grades K-12.
- Prioritize funding for those districts seeking to replace non-evidence-based curriculum, including Lucy Calkins Units of Study and Fountas and Pinnell.

California, despite a similar political landscape and local control system, is prioritizing the science of reading by:



- Investing \$250 million for reading coaches **and specialist training** to support district implementation of evidence-based reading instruction.
- Creating two new statewide literacy director **positions** focused on improving third grade reading outcomes by 2026.
- Leadership from Governor Gavin Newsom calling for a “**literacy road map**” that would emphasize “explicit instruction in phonics, phonemic awareness, and other decoding skills” in the early grades.
- Mandating, through state legislation, new literacy standards and performance expectations for **teacher credentialing** that put a greater emphasis on teaching foundational reading aligned with the science of reading, along with support for the most challenged readers, English learners, and pupils with exceptional needs, including dyslexia.

A snapshot of state actions shows local control does not preclude state leadership on such a critical social justice and equity issue. State leaders can also look to emerging efforts in Ohio, Oregon, Illinois, Virginia, and Pennsylvania for more ideas on policy changes in similar political climates. In contrast, with different political landscapes, Florida, Mississippi, and Tennessee are also making significant strides toward fully incorporating the science of reading throughout teaching and learning.

Policy Recommendations

Over the past three years, New York State’s school districts have received historic financial investments from state and federal resources. Additionally, the state education department prioritized a customer service approach to local school districts in order to accelerate context-driven solutions to pandemic interruptions to instruction. Further, state leaders passed bold policies focused on student well-being, diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, despite these investments and shift in orientation, state leaders have yet to center the science of reading in the form of guidance, technical assistance, legislation, or policy.

Now is the time for bold, commonsense reforms aligned with science and commensurate with the challenges facing schools and students, and based on the following vision:

- NYSED, SUNY, CUNY and the Board of Regents must provide leadership and guidance to districts and teacher preparation programs that prioritizes the use of evidence-based curriculum and other strategies aligned with the science of reading.
- State policymakers must pass comprehensive early literacy legislation that builds on the efforts of other states and is tailored to the unique needs of New York schools.
- Districts and school boards must invest in the use of evidence-based instructional resources for all K-5 students, while providing high-quality professional learning experiences and supports for teachers.
- Schools must provide more transparency, support, and partnership opportunities to parents and community partners.
- Early childhood education, summer, and afterschool programs must play a role in building the literacy skills of children before they enter kindergarten and during non-school hours.

Ten-Point Policy Plan

New York is unique in its education landscape and culture. The state’s rich diversity requires that state leaders develop a bold and comprehensive statewide literacy plan that balances the need for flexibility and evidence-based practice by incorporating ten key components:

1 Evidence-Based Curriculum and Instructional Resources:

New York must prioritize the use of evidence-based reading curriculum incorporating the five pillars of reading instruction, including a strong focus on content knowledge and cultural relevance, through the following options:

- Incentivize the use of curriculum aligned to the science of reading through grants that provide funds for districts to purchase evidence-based resources, with a priority for districts that are replacing non-evidence-based programs such as Units of Study and Fountas and Pinnell.
- Provide a list of state-approved or Ed Reports-approved curriculum for districts to consider.
- Issue guidance that helps districts select and evaluate curriculum on evidence-based and cultural relevancy.
- Mandate the use of state-approved evidence-based curriculum for K-5 schools, with exemptions for districts with strong reading outcomes or divergent learning needs.

2 Coaching and Aligned Professional Learning:

Current teachers not trained in the science of reading will understandably require significant time and support to adjust their instruction and will need:

- Professional learning opportunities aligned with new evidence-based curriculum and other instructional materials.
- Training in the science of reading and five pillars of reading instruction through programs such as LETRS or those developed by The New Teacher Project (TNTP) and others.
- Support for on-site literacy coaches trained in the science of reading and placed to support schools most in need of support.

3 Teacher Preparation Programs and Residencies:

New York can increase the number of teacher preparation programs that support new teachers with evidence-based literacy instruction by:

- Requiring aspiring elementary teachers to complete coursework aligned to the science of reading and five pillars of reading instruction.
- Upgrading state reading credential assessments to measure understanding of concepts related to the science of reading.
- Providing incentives to teacher preparation programs that seek to provide training in evidence-based literacy instruction.
- Design a reading specialist extension certificate for current in-service teachers who are interested in supporting the state’s reading efforts.
- Continue investing in teacher residencies and clinical placements, such as the Empire State Teacher Residency Program.

4

K-3 Progress Monitoring: The state and local districts can do a better job of identifying and supporting student reading progress and needs **before** third grade, by:

- Providing a state-approved list of reading assessments and screeners that measure student ability across the five pillars of evidence-based reading instruction and also screen for dyslexia.
- Providing regular formative assessments (at least three times per year), beginning in kindergarten, to monitor student literacy development and adjust instruction based on student data.
- Require or incentivize districts to develop and share individualized reading plans for the most challenged readers, especially those in vulnerable student groups, beginning in the first grade and sharing that information with parents.

5

Public Reporting and Transparency: New York public officials, parents, and taxpayers need a better understanding of how schools are teaching reading. State leaders should increase public transparency around reading instruction by:

- Supporting NYSED to annually collect and publish data on curriculum and instructional resources districts in use for K-5 reading.
- Requiring local districts to make their reading curriculum and instructional approach to early reading accessible to the public on their websites and public facing documents.
- Providing a template for districts to develop and publish a publicly accessible comprehensive K-5 literacy plan.

6

Family Engagement: Families and caregivers play a critical role in student reading success, but need more support and guidance from schools on how to help their child:

- NYSED can provide guidance that builds family engagement capacity at the district level. Guidance could include evidence-based resources and tools that families can use to support their child's reading development during out of school time.
- Families should be empowered by the state, districts, and community partners to identify and advocate for best practices in literacy at their child's school with a focus on evidence-based, culturally affirming curriculum, and instructional resources.
- NYSED can develop a template that districts can use to annually notify parents of their child's reading progress in grades K-3 and ensure parents are involved with the development of individualized reading plans.

7

Expanded Learning Opportunities: Strong school-community partnerships focused on tutoring, community schools, summer, and afterschool programming must be part of a comprehensive state early literacy policy and include:

- Capacity building resources and opportunities for community-based organizations to support early literacy instruction and highlight promising school-community partnerships across the state.
- Funding streams for afterschool and community-based partners focused on advancing early literacy, with priority for school-community partnerships.

- Additional support to students who are experiencing reading challenges —through summer camps, afterschool programs, and tutoring that encourage collaboration between teachers and youth development staff.

8

Develop a Birth-8 Approach: Strong reading skills start at birth, with ample opportunities for social, emotional, and cognitive development between the ages of 0-5. The state, districts, and community partners can support this development by:

- Increasing collaboration between NYSED, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (NYSOCFS), and other state partners to develop a seamless system of support, care, and services from birth to third grade.
- Providing increased funding and technical assistance to help communities screen children for developmental delays that may affect reading success in school.
- Ensuring that parents and child care providers have access to tools that promote vocabulary development, including book-rich environments and language-rich adult-child interactions.

9

Blended Learning and Technology: Blended learning and the use of technology can help schools differentiate instruction and provide more time for teachers to work with students and families. The use of these tools should be incorporated into state and district literacy plans by:

- Establishing an innovation fund at the state level for early literacy projects that combine technology and high-quality instructional materials to personalize learning at scale for students.

- Upgrading connectivity infrastructure so that districts and schools can personalize learning at scale for students.
- Ensuring that professional learning and coaching for early literacy and the science of reading incorporates opportunities for teachers to build capacity in the use of technology and blended learning.
- Working with school districts to develop communities of practice focused on blended learning and literacy while elevating best practices from across New York and the nation.

10

Build a Statewide Campaign: Shifting instructional practices across the state and building awareness about the science of reading and importance of third grade reading proficiency will require significant communications and messaging support. To ensure successful policy implementation, we recommend that:

- State leaders, in partnership with key stakeholders, develop a public website and resources to build awareness and support of early literacy.
- NYSED should publish an annual report on the state early literacy landscape, including student outcome data and progress toward key goals as the state shifts to more evidence-based literacy instruction.
- Working with state and local teacher leaders, develop a campaign and set of resources designed to support teacher buy-in of evidence-based literacy instruction.

CONCLUSION

Students across New York are experiencing reading challenges because our instructional methods have not aligned with what science says about how children learn best. Further, professional learning efforts have not always been aligned to curricula — a critical feature of high-quality teaching and learning. Students and teachers have an opportunity to thrive if we as a state decide to use curricula and other instructional resources aligned to the science of reading. When such instructional resources are then aligned to professional learning and support for educators, New York will be the literacy leader that the nation looks to.

Education leaders are not alone in this effort. Most students, parents and teachers want better curriculum and welcome additional support. Educators want high-quality curricula that is accessible, appropriate, and engaging for all learners. They also

want training that enables them to implement their curricula effectively.

New Yorkers are ready for a shift and students cannot wait.

New York, once a leader in rigorous K-12 education, can lead the nation and provide schools with the leadership, guidance, and tools that teachers and students deserve. New York has a unique opportunity to learn from other states and craft thoughtful policies that meet the unique needs of New York students.

New York can create a more equitable future for New York students by ensuring that every child has a high-quality education rooted in strong literacy skills. The Education Trust–New York will continue partnering with stakeholders across the state to improve literacy outcomes for every child in New York.

DATA NOTES

Data on assessments from the 2021-22 school year are from the 3-8 Assessment databases and Report Card databases, which can be found at <https://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php>.

Data about NYS performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments in reading at grades 4, 8 and 12 are

from the Nation’s Report Card State Profile for New York, which can be found at <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/overview/NY>.

Data on individual school performance on the NYS 3-8 ELA Assessments available at <https://data.nysed.gov/>.

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