

Back to Basics Curriculum Analysis: Progress, but Concerns Remain

New York State continues to trail the nation in implementation and investment in evidence-based literacy instruction, commonly referred to as the science of reading. In 2024, Governor Hochul and the Legislature addressed this challenge by passing [Back to Basics](#), the state's first law to focus on the science of reading. Back to Basics provided \$10 million for professional learning for current educators and required all districts to attest that their curriculum and instructional resources were aligned with the science of reading by September 2025.

This curriculum requirement was particularly important because New York traditionally allows districts to select their own instructional materials, and the state has historically not collected data on district curriculum. In this context, many districts were relying on literacy curriculum and instructional approaches that run contrary to decades of research demonstrating that students learn to read most effectively through explicit, systematic instruction aligned with the science of reading.

Curriculum use has significant equity implications since many of the approaches that have been used in New York, particularly "balanced literacy," are not evidence-based and especially problematic for underserved student subgroups such as students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities like dyslexia. These groups consistently experience lower reading outcomes, making access to evidence-based literacy instruction critical to their future success.

EdTrust-New York submitted a Freedom of Information Law request to the New York State Education Department (NYSED) in the fall of 2025, to analyze district curriculum data required by Back to Basics. Our analysis finds some important early progress, with many districts throughout the State, including all of the Big 8 (New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers, Albany, Schenectady, and Utica) attesting that they are using evidence-based curriculum.

Yet, our analysis also reveals the continued use of disproven practices and curriculum in some districts throughout the State. This continued use of materials and instructional practices that are not aligned to the science of reading emphasizes the need for increased state urgency and support. This support is needed to both complete the shift to evidence-based instructional resources, as defined by [NYSED guidance](#), and ensure that educators can effectively utilize these instructional resources in the classroom.

Key Findings:

Overall, there has been improvement in instructional alignment with the science of reading across the State since the passage of Back to Basics. This progress emphasizes the importance of state leadership: when districts were required to use evidence-based curriculum, many heeded the call.

- While the state has not collected data on district curriculum use in the past, EdTrust-New York’s 2023 survey of districts showed over 30% (81 out of 252 that responded to our request) were using a non-evidence-based or balanced literacy core curriculum, with Units of Study being the most popular in the state.
- Based on 2025 data submitted to NYSED, our analysis found¹:

48%

(327 out of 688) of districts attested they were using evidence-based core literacy curriculum.

21%

(147 out of 688) of districts attested they were utilizing non-evidence-based or balanced literacy curriculum, with Units of Study and Fountas and Pinnell being most popular.

31%

(210 out of 688) of districts were utilizing literacy curriculum not reviewed by EdReports.

5%

(32 out of 688) were only using curriculum that partially met EdReports alignment standards.

6%

of districts attested they were using a combination of evidence-based and partially or non-evidence-based curriculum. These districts are included in the evidence-based curriculum count.

While this improvement is notable and the result of important efforts by advocates and policymakers, it shows that more work is needed with districts reluctant to shift to evidence-based curriculum. The Back to Basics law is not clear on enforcement, but certainly it violates the spirit — if not the letter of the law — for over 100 districts to continue to use curriculum that is proven to be harmful to students’ ability to read.

It is also important to note that through attestations alone, it is not possible to know whether the evidence-based curriculum that districts say they are using are being implemented with fidelity or if they are being used in all classrooms across districts. This may happen despite district adoption and particularly if educators have been using a balanced literacy approach for many years and are not receiving training or micro-credentials in the science of reading.

While most districts completed attestation forms claiming their instructional materials are fully aligned with the science of reading, a closer look reveals significant challenges.

¹ Data Note: Curriculum information was provided by NYSED after a FOIL request for Back to Basics district attestation forms from EdTrust-New York. We determined whether a curriculum was considered evidence-based through a review of curriculum review guides and websites including EdReports and The Reading League Curriculum Navigation Reports.

- While most districts address phonics and other key pillars of the science of reading as required by Back to Basics, some districts (147) continue to use a mix of non-evidence-based and evidence-based curriculum. Our analysis found that most of these districts were using disproven materials such as Units of Study, Fountas and Pinnell, and Reading Recovery, as their instructional materials, supplemented with phonics and other evidence-based resources.
- Districts using either non-evidence based curriculum or mixed approaches are across the State, but primarily in smaller rural and suburban districts, and especially in Long Island. Overall, these districts serve over 400,000 students across the state (17% of the overall student population), including:

53%

*White students
(210,604)*

23%

*Latinx students
(92,073)*

11%

*Asian and American
Pacific Islanders
students (44,339)*

9%

*Black students
(35,550)*

**Among
those
students,**

17%

*are Students with
Disabilities (69,968)*

8%

*are English Language
Learners/Multilingual
Learners (31,059)*

39%

*are students from low-
income backgrounds
(155,685)*

Non-evidence-based or balanced literacy approaches make learning to read difficult for many students, and simply adding a phonics or science of reading-aligned supplement to a balanced literacy curriculum can be both confusing and damaging to students' reading development. This is particularly troubling since many of these student subgroups have significantly lower reading proficiency levels based on state and federal assessment data and often lack access to tutoring and other outside support that more affluent families can provide to overcome non-evidence-based reading instruction.

- The Big 8 districts (New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers, Albany, Schenectady, and Utica) all attested to be using evidence-based literacy curriculum.
- Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), which provide shared services and educational programs to multiple districts in regions across the state, also shared curriculum information in the attestation process. Several BOCES included non-evidence-based literacy curriculum in their response, which is problematic since it has the potential to spread and support disproven practices across multiple school districts in a region.

Finding Implications:

❖ When the Governor and NYSED direct districts to make changes to instructional practice, many districts will make the necessary changes. This demonstrates the power of state leadership's bully pulpit and suggests the state should provide more leadership and support to steer districts in the right direction on foundational skills like literacy teaching and learning.

❖ Districts that have *not* made the appropriate curricular shifts need urgent intervention from NYSED. Using a combination of balanced and structured literacy instructional materials sends mixed messages to students and can lead to instructional inconsistency and confusion.

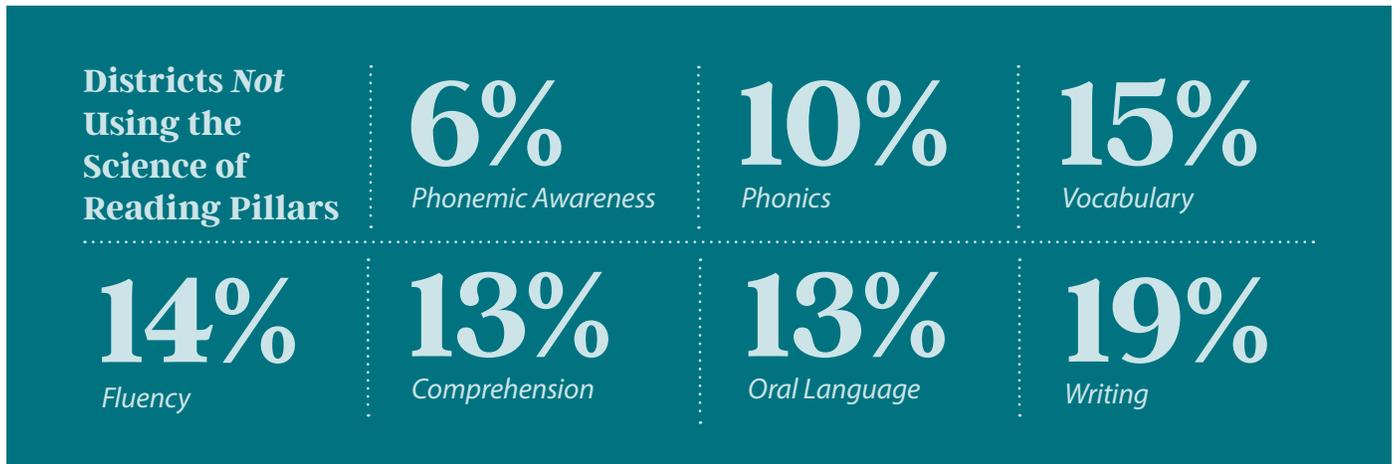
- It can be damaging for students to receive explicit phonics instruction in the morning and then be told to guess a word using three-cueing in the afternoon. This can especially impact students with dyslexia as it undermines the development of their decoding skills and confidence.
- Continued use of leveled readers like Fountas and Pinnell can widen achievement gaps by keeping students in “lower” reading groups that lack access to grade-level complex texts.
- Teachers may feel overwhelmed by competing instructional messages, philosophies, and materials, particularly when they have not been trained in evidence-based instructional practices.
- Without a coherent framework, districts often struggle to maintain consistency across grade levels, which is a key lever for equitable instruction.
- This is especially concerning because early reports about the state-funded Back to Basics science of reading professional learning led by NYSUT have included complaints that the training includes some elements of balanced literacy instruction.

❖ The concerns about districts that are using a combination of balanced and structured literacy aligns with the SUNY New Paltz Science of Reading Center's [recent survey](#) of educators, which found that:

- More than 90% of educators support the science of reading, but just 28% said it is the primary method used in their classrooms, with most reporting blending evidence-based strategies with other approaches.
- Nearly 70% of schools have adopted or are piloting science of reading–aligned curricula, but many educators continue to rely on supplements or are designing materials themselves due to gaps in adoption or clarity.



The curriculum findings also align with [recently released NYSED attestation form data](#) that shows the following percentage of districts attesting they are *not* in alignment with the “big six” science of reading pillars:



Ensuring all districts are using curriculum aligned to the science of reading is critical, but only one piece of what is needed for a comprehensive overhaul of our instructional approach to literacy in New York State.



Recommendations

New York is in the early stages of alignment with the science of reading. At the same time, states such as Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama have invested in comprehensive, multi-year literacy reforms for the last decade, resulting in improved reading outcomes that outperform New York's. More recently, states such as California, New Jersey, Michigan, and Pennsylvania have made literacy a top priority through investments and policy changes in curriculum, professional learning, and universal screening.

Increased state action and support is needed to improve reading policy and outcomes, and we urge state leaders to build on Back to Basics by adopting the following policies and investments:



1 Improve curriculum data collection and public transparency

- NYSED must work with districts not meeting Back to Basics science of reading curriculum requirements and ensure they are able to demonstrate they are fully aligned by September 2026. This should include efforts to better understand district use of curriculum that has not been reviewed by EdReports and other experts.
- In future years, districts should be required to submit Foundational Literacy Skills Plans that include their approach to foundational skill development, universal screening, professional learning, and family engagement. These plans should also provide evidence of instructional implementation and indicators of how materials support diverse learners while aligning with grade level standards and the State's Culturally Response and Sustaining Education framework.
- NYSED should collect this data annually to provide accurate year-to-year comparisons and make the information available publicly at the state and district levels.
- Require districts to notify parents if they are using a non-evidence-based literacy curriculum.

2 Provide funding in the 2026 state budget for the following priorities:

- **Professional Learning:** Many current educators lack training in the science of reading from their preparation programs and require professional learning and coaching aligned to the science of reading to support classroom instruction and help meet the state's new literacy requirements. While we appreciate that the Executive Budget includes \$3 million for science of reading micro-credentials, we propose an additional \$17 million in grants to districts to ensure all K-12 educators are provided with the opportunity to receive a micro-credential in the science of reading and/or job-embedded coaching to improve classroom practice.

- **Universal Reading Screening:** New York is one of nine states that [does not require](#) universal reading screening in grades K-3 and one of twelve that does not mandate screening for dyslexia. Early screening is critical to identifying reading challenges early, informing instruction, and providing targeted support to students. We propose requiring districts to screen all K-3 students three times per year using an evidence-based screener that includes dyslexia identification. The state should provide this tool free to districts, along with training and support for educators, while allowing districts to select from a state-approved list of evidence-based alternative screeners. We request \$10 million to purchase the screener and support districts and educators with implementation.
- **Curricula Aligned with the Science of Reading:** We propose a \$15 million investment to provide grants to districts not using curricula aligned to the science of reading, for the purchase of K-5 literacy curricula and instructional resources aligned to the science of reading, with priority for districts replacing balanced literacy programming. NYSED should provide a vetted list of curricula that districts can choose from to utilize these funds.
- **High-Impact Tutoring:** High-impact tutoring is a proven strategy for improving student reading outcomes, and we urge the Legislature to include \$10 million in the final budget to support these programs across the state.
- **Educator Preparation Programs:** Support and expand [The Path Forward](#) initiative to ensure all state educator preparation programs (EPPs) are fully aligned with the science of reading to ensure that all new teachers enter the classroom prepared to implement evidence-based instruction in their school. Support the Executive Budget request to provide \$1.5 million for EPP-District partnerships in Rochester and Yonkers and expand these partnerships in future years through public and private funding.

3

Develop and invest in a comprehensive, four-year state plan to embed evidence-based literacy instruction across the entire education system.

- States such as Mississippi, Tennessee, and Louisiana have demonstrated that sustained investment—coupled with strong leadership, educator training, and coherent policy alignment—can produce [measurable gains](#) in reading achievement for all students. These states outperformed New York in fourth-grade NAEP Reading despite spending significantly less on education.



At the same time, states that have not previously led on literacy, such as California, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, have recently adopted and invested in comprehensive literacy policies. [California](#), with the leadership of Governor Newsom, has invested \$500 million for literacy coaches and \$200 million for professional learning, while developing state approved lists for dyslexia screening, literacy curriculum, and professional learning. Governor Whitmer of Michigan just proposed a [\\$625 million investment](#) in early literacy, including early childhood programs, high-impact tutoring, and professional learning. Closer to home, New York City Public Schools has implemented comprehensive literacy reform since 2023, resulting in [improved reading outcomes](#) for all student subgroups on local and state assessments.

State leaders must act with urgency and build upon the Back to Basics law by making literacy the top state education priority over the next four years. This four-year plan must include proven, evidence-based strategies used by other states, while also leveraging New York’s unique strengths and innovative programs such as NYC Reads. Many of these strategies are included in A.78, the Right to Read bill sponsored by Assemblymember Robert Carroll, which should be passed as the state’s literacy framework. In addition to the priorities listed above, proven strategies in this four-year plan should include:

- State-approved science of reading-aligned curriculum and professional learning lists that districts can choose from
- Funding for literacy coaches with expertise in the science of reading in high-need elementary schools
- Home literacy reports to parents on student reading progress in grades K-3
- Summer reading camps for students identified as needing additional support
- High-impact tutoring during and outside of the school day and year
- Family engagement and early childhood education programming to support early reading development

