

The Courage to Lead Literacy

Empowering current and aspiring education leaders
with the essential knowledge and strategies for
bold literacy transformation

BY LAURA STEWART
Chief Academic Officer



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Foreword

When asked to write a foreword for this book, my thoughts turned immediately to John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*, a book that propelled many people decades ago to reflect upon two questions: who are our heroes? And why, like the legendary heroes of Homer, and ancient Greece, do they continue to inspire us? In an age like ours, when the status of hero is rarely synonymous with teachers and education, it is all the more right and good that this book celebrates those whose commitment to the young of our species transcends the fleeting notions of celebrity and fame. Rather, the leaders in this book will never be known by the masses, but they will affect, often as not invisibly, both the lives of countless children and also the lives these children will, in their turn, affect. I celebrate not only each of the leaders who follow in these pages, I also commend the author Laura Stewart, who herself is just such a leader. It is a reflection of her leadership that she chose to describe here what educational leaders contribute and how this can inspire our own contributions to the development of the deep readers and deep thinkers in our generation and the next. These are the young who will contribute to democracy and to the future of our species.

Those are lofty words, but they are as real as the children who need all our knowledge as educators to reach their potential. It is here that I will offer a few thoughts about the great contribution of full, deep literacy to the development of children. I have written thousands of words about what reading gives humanity and what it provides each child who must learn this strange and wondrous invention. If I had to distill a few insights for the reader of this book, it would be the following three thoughts. First, reading begins, as I wrote long ago (Wolf, 2007), under the

crook of an arm. Before any teacher or administrator watches the child come in the kindergarten door, we as a society must teach our parents to read, speak, and yes, sing!, whenever they can to their child. But especially read! From the time a baby can sit under the arm of the beloved, let them hear the words on a page written to put thoughts and things into language. Little is more important in those first early years.

Second, I will hope that all our educators learn about the beauty of the first steps, if you will, that the young reading brain needs to connect the many processes. We are the connectors. I say this because reading is not natural. It possesses no single area or genetic program for its development. Rather, we the teachers must help every child learn to connect the cognitive and linguistic processes underlying the alphabetic principle and connect this conceptual leap to the meanings of words, their syntactic uses, and the unique ways that all these processes, when connected, activate our feelings and emotions. Such a conceptualization of early reading requires a broader understanding of foundational skills that includes phonics and phoneme awareness, but that links these important components to the oral language components children bring to bear: semantic, syntactic, morphological components. In such a view, the continuing tensions about which methods are best is lifted from a binary perspective to one that is more comprehensive, while always systematic and explicitly taught. The dangers in any larger view are several: first, it can become a checklist of things to teach, rather than a carefully integrated approach; second, it can be cherry-picked rather than systematically, developmentally taught.

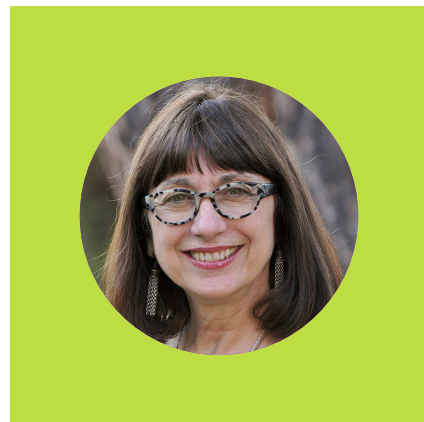
The pivotal word here is “taught.” Such a view, that stems from research on the developing reading brain, means that we never assume that a child will naturally induce the alphabetic principle by exposure to stories and books. Nor can we assume that a child will bring a sufficient language background to connect critical language processes to the alphabetic principle. As Connie Juel often lamented, the largest problem in many reading programs is the assumption that if children can decode a word, they know what it means. As my former teacher, Jeanne Chall, often said, although many children can learn from any method, a very large number of children need us, their teachers, to help them learn the bottom rungs of the reading ladder. If we teach everyone, we will not miss anyone. With a developmental, multi-component approach that is aided by consistent monitoring, we will be able to propel each reader, according to their individual profile of strengths and weaknesses, up that ladder at their own pace.

My third thought or insight for the readers of this book is that we must always keep our eyes on the true prize: deep reading and deep thinking—they are each other’s isotope. For most people the goal is fluent comprehension or proficiency. I differ only in the way such words obfuscate the many, beautiful, sophisticated processes that underlie fluency and comprehension (Wolf, 2018). Deep reading includes: analogical processes that link background knowledge to the new text; perspective-taking that builds empathy; inferential skills that build discernment; critical analysis that builds a foundation for insight and the evaluation of truth (never more important in our age’s bombardment of dis- and mis-information);

and the contemplative or reflective processes that build an interior space for the reader’s best thoughts, sometimes novel, sometimes empowering, often generative, always contributing to deep thinking in an age where that goes missing.

Such are my thoughts about literacy that I hope will provide a context for appreciation of those leaders in this book who embody the quest for developing the best thoughts in our next generation in all their heterogeneity and uniqueness. I salute both the author and the individuals she gives us as models for ourselves.

Wolf, M. (2018). *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*. New York: Harper Collins.



MARYANNE WOLF



Introduction

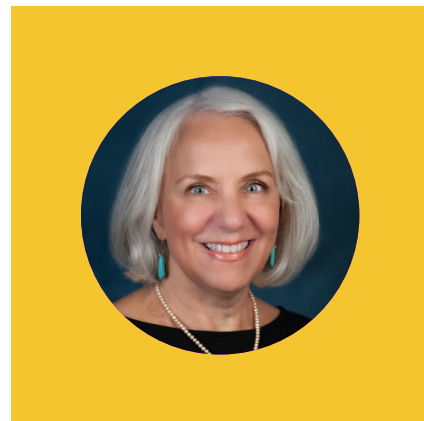
I first became interested in the idea of courageous leadership when I read *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* by Parker Palmer 25 years ago. In this lovely book, Palmer reminds us that teaching begins with the exploration of our “inner landscape” to connect fully with our passion, identity, and integrity. Teaching itself is a courageous act. You must have courage to be in this profession as a fully present individual. The concept of teaching as a courageous act followed me through my transition from teaching to leadership, where it became clear to me that being a leader was not simply about assuming a position but was also about assuming a stance of looking outward to serve others from an inner integrity. As one of the authorities on leadership, John Maxwell states:

“I believe the bottom line in leadership isn’t how far we advance ourselves but how far we advance others. That is achieved by serving others and adding value to their lives.”

I have had the privilege of working with, mentoring with, and observing transformational leaders over many years and I have learned as a leader (often the hard way) that maintaining that stance requires inner fortitude, wisdom, vulnerability, compassion, and yes, above all, courage. Courage to be a continual learner, to self-reflect and redirect when necessary, to grow and nurture future leaders, and to hold and protect a vision in service to others.

That vision is especially compelling in the domain of literacy leadership. It is my strongly held conviction that to transform our current literacy narrative, which we must do, bold and courageous leadership is required. This is the most important work we do, and our students and society are counting on us.

It is my hope that as you read this book you will find some practical ways to take actionable steps to build a transformative literacy plan and that you will also be inspired by the incredible leaders profiled within, all of whom inhabit the traits of courageous leaders and are continually serving others—ultimately the students in their communities—with passion and integrity.



Laura Stewart

LAURA STEWART

Chief Academic Officer, 95 Percent Group

Stepping into transformational literacy leadership

Courageous leaders can be found in every field and industry on the globe. They are individuals speaking up for the highest good—even in the face of criticism from those who fear change.

In the world of education, bold leaders can be found at all levels and in all roles: board members, higher education, district and building administrators, instructional coaches, classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, community members; in fact, anyone who serves our students can act as bold leaders. They are leaders who understand deeply what children need to thrive in our complex, interconnected world. They understand that literacy is the gateway, not only to students' academic success, but also to their ability to flourish in school and beyond. More importantly, these leaders understand that literacy is a human right that can—and must—be guaranteed to all students. Their relentless focus on literacy for all is backed by the certainty that if we don't get literacy right, we don't get anything right.

Literacy leaders—those who blaze a path toward bringing research into action, sometimes changing long-held beliefs about learning to read—often share a bold vision for the future: to ensure that all children reach their full potential.

This type of groundbreaking work has always been challenging, but in the face of very real achievement gaps and friction about which methods are “right,” it's becoming ever more important. In *The Courage to Lead* we are shining a light on the critical leadership changing the trajectory of literacy education on a broad level in the hopes of inspiring the large-scale literacy change needed in communities everywhere.

Leading literacy: A focus on implementation

Most educators have at least heard of the “science of reading”—a term encompassing decades of research focused on understanding how children learn to read and informing how best to teach all students. This phrase is often followed by stories of school districts re-examining and re-imagining both their instructional methods, and sometimes their entire belief systems, about how children learn to read. It’s possible you know some of these stories; maybe you are already part of these stories.

Published in the fall of 2023, the ebook the [*Science of Reading 2.0: Implementation made easy*](#), outlined the shift from theoretical models to the implementation of instructional practice—specifically, implementation aligned with science-of-reading evidence born out of decades of research.

The Courage to Lead is a sequel to that earlier ebook. This guide focuses on unpacking the bold steps needed for district and school leaders to lead the movement from knowledge and theoretical frameworks about teaching reading to actionable implementation with integrity. Because of the growing interest in learning to do this work on a large scale, *The Courage to Lead* also shines a light on the people currently leading the way toward changing how reading is taught in our schools. This guide recognizes and celebrates the movement’s progress and pioneers—many of whom are still deep in the work—while exploring how those groundbreaking leaders sparked momentous change in their communities.

What defines a literacy leader?

CHECKLIST

So how do we define a “courageous literacy leader?” To guide others toward success, this type of leader must:

1. Know that the primary objective is ensuring all students become readers and writers.
2. Defend the stance that literacy is the foundation for student success in school and beyond.
3. Cultivate a vision for transformation that guides every decision made in pursuit of literacy excellence.
4. Set the culture for collective problem solving to create a teamwork approach and offer educators and invested parties a system instead of a silo.

More than anything else, a literacy leader is devoted to unlocking literacy for all children—and ensuring that *all* really means *all*.



“

Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school.”

KENNETH LEITHWOOD

Educational Researcher and Professor
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education,
University of Toronto

“

Implementation science can help leaders maximize efforts to improve classroom functioning and student outcomes by providing strategies to ensure that implemented programs have a greater likelihood of success.”

AARON LYON

Founder and Director
School Mental Health Assessment, Research, and Training
(SMART) Center

The importance of implementation science

In *The Science of Reading 2.0* (p.12) we began a conversation about implementation science, defined as “the scientific study of methods to promote the systematic uptake of research findings and other evidence-based practices into routine practice” (Eccles & Mittman, 2006). The goal of this guide is to continue deepening literacy leaders’ understanding of implementation science in the context of this important work.

Implementation science is a game-changer for crafting transformative literacy change. When leaders know this science, they can understand that the process will take multiple years, build capacity for sustainability, and maintain a relentless vision. They will also reap the highest and greatest returns on their investments: successful student outcomes.

When we are crafting a literacy transformation plan, we know we cannot just let it happen. “Research has suggested that without implementation teams using clearly defined implementation methods, it takes 17 years to move approximately half of an intended new initiative into routine practice (Balas & Boren, 2000; Morris, Wooding & Grant, 2011; Bauer, Damschroder, Hagedorn, Smith, & Kilbourne, 2015)” (Perspectives on Language and Literacy, International Dyslexia Association; Fall, 2018). With the goal of literacy for all, we don’t have 17 years or more to wait! Instead, we have to, “make it happen,” with a clear plan for building sustainable systems and a powerful focus on achieving that plan.

Implementation science



The graphic is adapted from the “Formula for Success” equation (Fixen, et al., 2010; conceptualized by the National Implementation Research Network, 2013) and is designed to help explain why intentionality in implementation is so important. In this version of the active implementation formula for success the intended **Socially Significant Outcomes** for transformational change are “Educational equity” and “Literacy for all.” Factors that will help produce those outcomes include the following:

- **Effective practice** that follows the evidence to align instruction to that evidence. In other words, literacy leaders must enact principles of evidence-aligned instruction (see *The Science of Reading 2.0.*) and acquire effective instructional resources and tools to support that instruction. Effective practice also includes large-scale frameworks such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support or MTSS.
- **Effective implementation** encompasses the implementation teams and systems that support the implementation, including professional learning and ongoing coaching. This factor also includes time for the learning and reflection.
- **Enabling contexts** include the teams, policies (at the local, state, and national level), procedures, and overall environment and setting that hold the implementation; this is where literacy leadership is especially critical.

Each of these factors contributes to the success of the intended “Socially Significant Outcomes.” And, just like the [Simple View of Reading](#), this formula is a *multiplicative equation*.



To understand how this formula works when evaluating an implementation, consider the following example with a hypothetical elementary school:

- The school *has* aligned its instructional practices with the evidence but *does not* use evidence-aligned curricula in all grades and in all tiers of instruction. As a result, the school is only 80 percent compliant with the Effective Practice component.
- While the school's teachers *do* have ongoing professional learning opportunities, they *do not* receive coaching, making the school only 50 percent compliant with the Effective Implementation component.
- The literacy leadership in the district *is* consistent, but it *doesn't have* a universally shared or supported vision, which means they're only 60 percent compliant with Enabling Contexts.
- Fitting all these numbers into the equation, the school has only a 24% chance of effectiveness of the initiative, which will limit their ability to reach their outcomes.

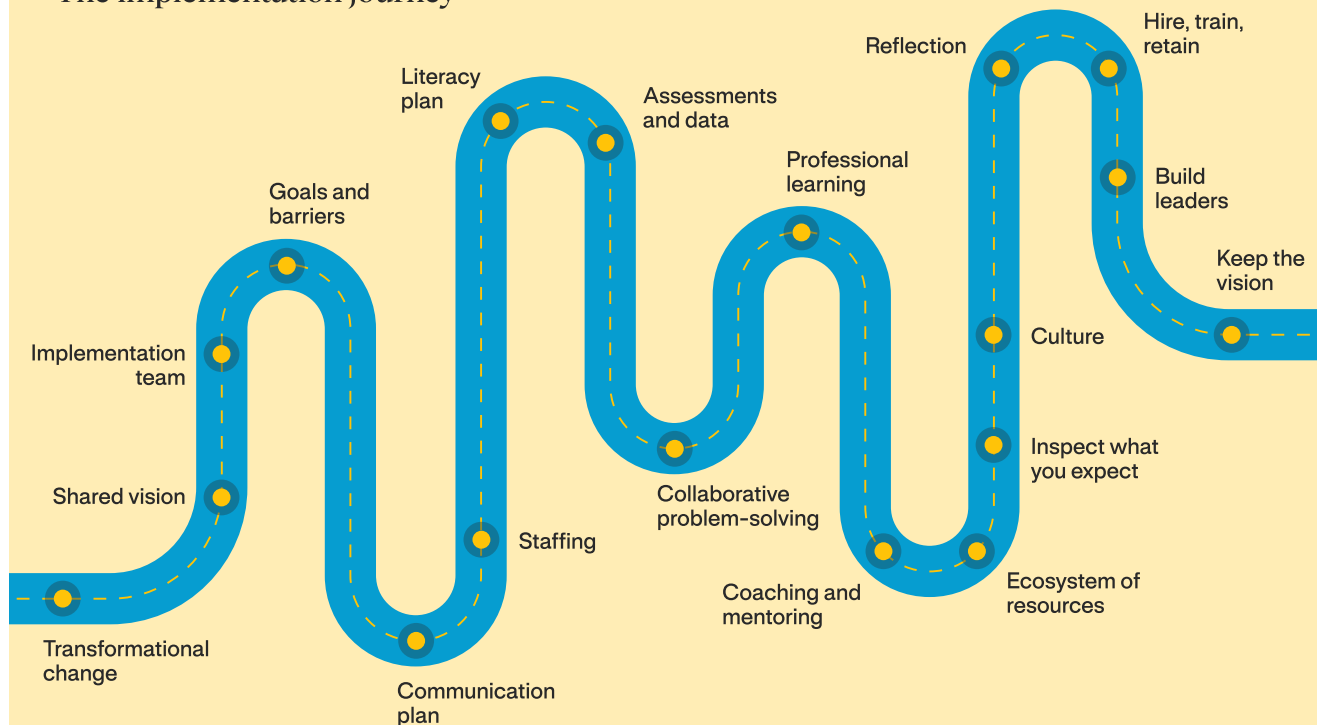
$$80\% \times 50\% \times 60\% = 24\% \text{ effectiveness}$$

The takeaway? We need to be all in when we begin the journey of implementation.

Phases of implementation: A blueprint for sustainable change

Working through the implementation phases (adapted from the National Implementation Research Network or NIRN [AI Hub \(unc.edu\)](https://aihub.unc.edu)) in a well-constructed and well-designed process typically lasts two to four years; however, three to five years may be more realistic in some cases. During that time, literacy leaders identify their desired changes, gather a diverse team from the school community, ensure that training and coaching are a priority, and use data to inform decisions on an ongoing basis. Although the implementation process isn't always a linear experience, understanding the importance of each phase and knowing when you are (or are not) ready to move on can make all the difference in creating sustainable literacy change.

The implementation journey



The phases of implementation

EXPLORATION

Setting a vision; creating a collaborative team to identify the need and the best innovation

INSTALLATION

Securing staff buy-in and leadership support; building the plan

INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION

Trying out the innovation; establishing systems of support with feedback loops

FULL IMPLEMENTATION

Skillfully using and integrating the innovation

SUSTAINABILITY

Securing long-term commitment and continued growth

— Adapted from Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, and Wallace (2007)

Exploration

During the exploration phase, leaders should form a diverse team of school community members with a serious investment in transformation. *Having an effective team allows for all voices to be heard and for potential obstacles to be seen in advance.* Leaders should strive for a shared understanding of the implementation goals, which may require courageous conversations focused on underlying belief systems, expectations for students, and commitment to the goal of all students learning to read. The focus during this phase should be on identifying the drive behind the change and securing the vision for change.

Courageous leader moves in the exploration phase

Be clear on the scope of the initiative and be prepared for what transformation involves

Changing the way literacy is taught is what we would call **transformational change**: systemic change that involves a fundamental shift in the way things are done and the structures that exist. Transformational change is more radical and far-reaching than transactional change (where systems and structures mostly stay the same), and often involves changes in values, beliefs, and assumptions. Transformational change is aimed at creating a new reality, rather than just improving the current one.

Begin with the end in mind

What do you want your school or district to look like 3-5 years from now? Hold on to that vision.

Elevate the need for change

This will likely require bold conversations about where students are by looking at all the data and confronting any gaps in achievement. This is not a blame game, but an honest look at what the data show and asking ourselves if what we are doing is working for ALL students.

Gauge the readiness of the school community

In addition to having transparent conversations about students, leaders also need to have honest conversations about the readiness of the school community to commit to change. There is no question that “implementation occurs in the context of community” (Fixen, et al., 2005) so buy-in and involvement in the initiative is critical. In this process, leaders play a crucial role, and just like with students, a differentiated approach with people at different levels of readiness is required. For example, if there are people with no awareness of a need for change, in denial of that need, or actively opposed

to change, leaders can raise awareness of the issue through compassionate, albeit sometimes uncomfortable, one-on-one conversations. While there is the inherent risk of losing staff throughout a transformative change process, this is important: When community members come to the understanding of the need for change and the importance of an implementation plan, the plan has a greater chance of success.

Create the implementation team

Implementation teams contribute to the design, planning, and support of the implementation. The team is vital to engaging and communicating with the wider school community. It is critical that the team is diverse in that it represents all invested parties, and that collectively they have the wide range of experiences and perspectives necessary to support an effective and equitable implementation. Team members already have a head start on knowledge of the science of reading and best practices, have some knowledge of the implementation science, are capable of reflection and flexibility, are willing to engage in the work, and are given adequate time to collaborate. Some experts recommend three to five members on the team, while some recommend five to seven. The number of team members is largely dependent on the size of the school community represented.

In addition to convening the members of the implementation team, leaders also recognize the importance of putting into place meeting processes and protocols (schedule, agendas, documentation, communication, action plans, etc.) as well as systems to engage in reflection and continuous improvement.

Identify goals and desired outcomes

This is where specificity will be required. What will success look like at the end of the first year? Second year? Third year and beyond? With the implementation team, collectively identify desired outcomes for all students, and also for teachers, leaders, and community members. For example:

- At the end of year ____, the number of students at grade-level proficiency will increase by ____.
- At the end of year ____, all teachers will receive professional learning in ____ and show ____ level of knowledge competency.

- At the end of year ____, ____, # of community events will be hosted to inform parents and other parties of ____.

It is important to use the current data to determine goals, keeping in mind you may need specific goals to eliminate gaps in student achievement.

Identify barriers to the implementation

Funding, staffing, resources, and time are all potential barriers to an effective implementation. Thinking through these issues is important in the exploration phase; without solutions to these very real and tangible barriers, an implementation initiative cannot survive. In a literacy transformation, new evidence-aligned curriculum resources and professional learning will likely be needed, so beginning to examine those resources is important in the exploration phase. Ensuring team members have time to meet, releasing staff for professional learning, hiring new staff members to achieve desired outcomes for students, and re-aligning schedules to accommodate a schoolwide MTSS model are all considerations during the exploration phase.

Create a communication plan

One of the most important tasks for a leader is to determine the communication plan before, during, and after the implementation. Key questions to ask when formulating the plan:

- What needs to be communicated and how does the information change over time?
- Who needs to be communicated with, internally and externally, and in what cadence?
- How will we communicate to reach the broadest audience?
- Who will be responsible for the communication?
- How do we determine the effectiveness of the communication?

Commit to the shared vision

Committing to the vision of *unlocking literacy for all children* is at the heart of the equity and human-rights conversation and a critical outcome of the exploration phase. Literacy is always a priority and is the gatekeeper to students' success; all children deserve the right to learn to read. Literacy is always a priority; all children have a right to learn to read. Courageous leaders set the vision, maintain the vision, and protect the vision.



“

Among the most critical determinants of implementation success is implementation leadership, and there is growing recognition that school leadership is essential for program success.”

AARON LYON

Founder and Director
School Mental Health Assessment, Research, and Training
(SMART) Center

Installation

Without structure and systems in place, change is hard to sustain. This phase focuses on how implementation will occur and who will be responsible for supporting the implementation. Skipping this phase can mean running into problems—and even having to stop an implementation for unforeseen issues. A gentle warning here: *don't try to build the plane as you fly it!*

BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

There are several compelling reasons for teachers to collaborate:

1. **Pooling diverse expertise and perspectives:** Collaboration allows teachers to pool their diverse expertise and perspectives so they can develop more comprehensive and well-rounded educational strategies.
2. **Fostering continuous learning:** Collaboration fosters a culture of continuous learning among educators, enabling them to provide a richer, more diverse learning experience for students.
3. **Promoting a supportive environment:** Collaboration promotes a supportive professional environment where educators can discuss challenges, seek advice, and provide mutual support.
4. **Ensuring a consistent educational experience:** Collaboration helps ensure a consistent educational experience in which students across classes and grade levels benefit from a cohesive and unified approach to learning.

— from *Top Ten Tools*, 95 Percent Group

Courageous leader moves in the installation phase

Make sure everyone is in the same boat, in the right seats, and rowing in the same direction

It is important to determine the strengths of staff and leaders to ensure personnel are making their best contributions. Personnel roles may include the following:

- An **administrative leader** who establishes policies to support change, oversees the implementation, formulates and delivers on the communication plan, allocates resources such as professional learning and curricula, and leads the focus on data by setting up clear systems for data collection and communication
- An **implementation team** that meets regularly, gathers and disseminates information, and communicates internally to bring challenges and concerns to the forefront
- **Grade-level teams and intervention teams** that examine data together to drive instructional decisions

Build a coherent and focused literacy plan that includes adequate time for literacy instruction

By making literacy instruction and planning a priority, school leaders send the message that it's a critical component of learning success—and that they are dedicated to ensuring that *all* children can learn how to read. Leaders prioritize literacy by:

- Acting with a sense of urgency
- Creating and implementing a solid plan for multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) for literacy
- Including enrichment and extension groups in the MTSS model
- Utilizing strong specialists with students who need the most time, intensity, and focus of instruction
- Making literacy scheduling a priority so that *all* students have the instruction they need

MTSS: A framework to improve reading outcomes through prevention and intervention

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is a school-wide framework for implementing effective instruction. MTSS involves efficiently targeting instruction to student needs based on universal screening and diagnostic assessments.

School and district teams use assessments in a data-based decision-making process to build a system of increasingly intensive instructional supports that are customized to fit the needs of the students. Simultaneously, schools must also assess their human and instructional resources to ensure that those needs are met.

MTSS includes the following features:

CORE INSTRUCTION

Core instruction is for all students and is designed to help them meet grade-level standards. It should be accessible and challenging so that every student can be engaged in their learning. This is considered Tier 1 instruction.

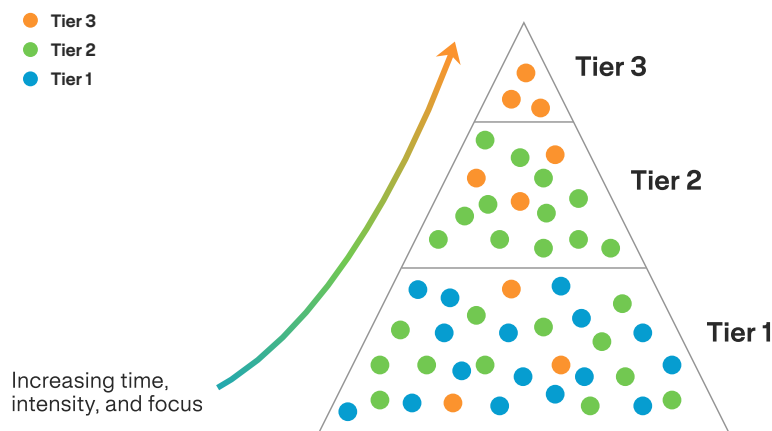
DIFFERENTIATION

Differentiation is the practice of modifying teaching strategies, activities, and assessments to meet the diverse learning needs of all students in a classroom. This approach acknowledges that students have varied backgrounds and abilities. When teachers differentiate instruction, they adapt their instruction's content, their process for teaching skills, and the product students create to demonstrate their learning.

SMALL-GROUP INTERVENTION

Small-group intervention is for students who require support beyond what is provided through core instruction. It addresses specific learning gaps or challenges identified through assessment and observation and involves delivering additional instruction and practice opportunities that will help students catch up to grade-level expectations. Tier 2 targeted intervention and Tier 3 intensive intervention are typically provided in small groups.

MTSS does not involve prescriptive practices to be rigidly implemented by tiers or levels of assignment. Nor is it adding to current, ineffective practices for the sake of innovation. It is a comprehensive system whereby ineffective practices are strategically abandoned and proven practices are prioritized.



Tier 1: Universal support

This tier represents the foundational level of instruction and support provided to all students within the general education environment. It focuses on high-quality, research-based teaching practices designed to meet the needs of the majority of students. The goal at this level is to prevent academic and behavioral problems through universal screening, differentiated instruction, and proactive classroom management strategies.

Tier 2: Targeted intervention

Tier 2 is designed for students who are not making adequate progress in the general education curriculum and who have been identified through assessments as needing additional support. These interventions are more focused and intensive than Tier 1 instruction, and they are typically delivered in small groups. They aim to address specific skill gaps or behavioral needs, and they involve monitoring progress closely to ensure students are responding to the intervention.

Tier 3: Intensive intervention

This tier provides individualized and highly intensive interventions for students who continue to struggle despite participation in Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction. Interventions at this level are tailored to the unique needs of the student, often involving one-on-one instruction. Progress is monitored frequently to adjust strategies as needed and to ensure that interventions are effective in meeting the student's learning goals.

(Taken from Top Ten Tools, 95 Percent Group)

Ensure the best assessments are in place to provide the necessary data

Literacy leaders need to know what kinds of information are most important for confident and effective instructional decision-making. A crucial part of this is having a depth of knowledge about how to use and integrate literacy data in a streamlined way. The following layers of assessment are all important to informing instruction, and the right tools need to be in place to provide efficient and accurate actionable data:

- **Universal screening** takes just a few minutes and uses specific subtests to determine who is reading on track and who needs more support (or enrichment).
- Valid, reliable **diagnostic assessments** drill down into discrete skills so that grouping students for intervention is effective and informed decision-making is quick and easy.

In the area of foundational skills, an effective diagnostic tool will provide assessment along a precise continuum of skills; this continuum follows an evidence-aligned predictable progression of skill development from least complex to most complex skills. A sample continuum of word study is shown below:

A rich hierarchical skills backbone



- **Progress-monitoring tools** provide ongoing evaluation of skill knowledge to gauge the impact of instruction so teachers can make instructional shifts based on the data.
- **State testing and reading scores** evaluate outcomes and help show the big picture schoolwide or districtwide.

To summarize:

DECISION	ASSESSMENT	WHO	WHEN	CHARACTERISTICS
Which students need support or enrichment?	Universal Screener	All students	beginning-of-year, middle-of-year, end-of-year	Brief Standardized Reliable and valid Predictive of future reading health
What should be taught?	Diagnostic Assessment	Students below or above benchmark	Whenever indicated for intervention	In-depth Linked to instruction
Is instruction working?	Progress Monitoring Assessment	Students receiving intervention	Typically every 1-3 weeks	Brief Standardized Reliable and valid Sensitive to growth
Did instruction work?	Outcome evaluation	All students	end-of-year	Comprehensive measures of grade-level standards

— Adapted from *Evidence-Based Assessment in the Science of Reading Cheat Sheet*; www.ldatschool.ca

In choosing assessments, ensure screeners, diagnostics, and progress-monitoring tools are culturally sensitive to various languages and dialects. If not, you risk over-identification and/or developing instructional plans that don’t address true student needs. (For more on this, see Mitchell Brookins’ essay on page 44.)

Ensure assessments are being used effectively

- Provide teachers with the training and support to maximize the use of assessments and data.
- Make data discussions about “our kids” and set the culture for collective problem-solving.

Keep the vision at the forefront

- Aim high for all students
- Embrace and inspire others to know that ALL means ALL



It is up to school and district leaders to construct effective and ongoing professional development for educators, equip them with evidence-aligned curriculum and resources, and create schedules that allocate sufficient time for reading instruction.”

DENA MORTENSON

Elementary Reading and Language Arts Supervisor
Waterbury Public Schools, CT

— from *The Reading Journal*, 2022

Initial implementation

This phase is characterized by collaborative planning and the reinforcement or establishment of a school culture conducive to continuous improvement. Leaders need to focus on creating an infrastructure for successful implementation. In some cases, leaders may want to consider having a smaller group of early adopters in the initial implementation before the full staff implementation.

Courageous leader moves in the initial implementation phase

Set up systems for a regular cadence for collaborative problem-solving around data

The infographic on the following page represents the process of data-driven decision-making.

The process

A series of pivotal functions that ensures decisions are well informed, effective, and adaptable.

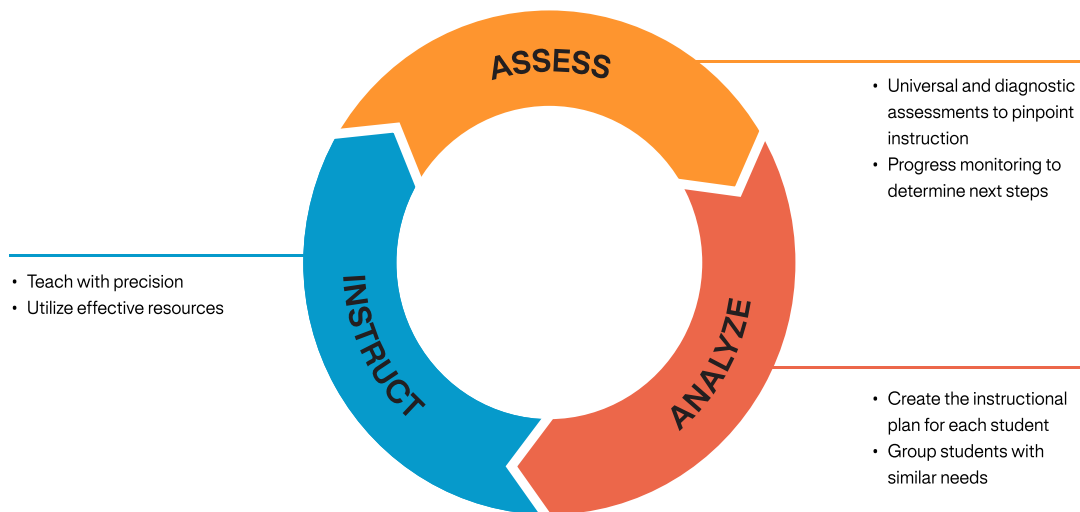


By integrating these five elements, educators can create a responsive and adaptive learning environment that promotes continuous improvement and achievement for all students.

Together, these functions form a cyclical process that enhances the strategic agility and intelligence of an organization.

Staff members use high fidelity data and feedback to inform decisions around instruction; a virtuous cycle of assessment, analysis, and instruction is enacted.

In a collaborative problem-solving model, teachers:



Make high quality professional learning a non-negotiable to empower teachers through knowledge and practice

Giving teachers the tools and professional learning to be successful empowers them to pursue new learning, to better their practice, and to engage in a cycle of inquiry that ensures ongoing growth for all.

Modeling the idea that learning and growth are a lifelong endeavor helps to create a culture of curiosity for both children and adults. Building that culture requires that leaders embrace the following:

- Provide professional learning to build everyone's knowledge base in evidence-aligned principles of instruction and structured literacy.
- Ensure that the professional learning provided is steeped in current research and practice, including supports for understanding culturally relevant pedagogy, and is based on the principles of adult learning.
- Determine that all staff members receive ongoing training and coaching in translating that knowledge to evidence-aligned instruction. Teachers need to feel confident in bringing new skills to their classrooms.

- Provide professional learning in literacy for all; every teacher is a reading teacher.
- See professional development as ongoing and long-term.
- Set up professional learning communities for shared learning and reflection.
- Study and learn alongside your teachers to fully understand the evidence-aligned instructional practices. To lead literacy, you need to know the science of reading and the science of learning.

One of the most effective ways to empower teachers is to ensure their leaders understand the work they do.

Supporting professional learning for teachers and engaging in professional learning for literacy instruction is one thing that sets courageous leaders apart.

When district and school leaders participate in professional learning, they model the journey of learning and adopting districtwide. Leadership can join conversations about student progress in constructive, knowledgeable ways. When all who have a stake in success participate in implementing a program with integrity, the change eventually becomes so ingrained that participants can embody the framework without needing a script.

To customize professional learning to all staff, consider these initial guiding questions:

What do **teachers** need to know to:

- Address students' needs based on data
- Understand the "why" around instructional decisions (building the knowledge base)
- Enact effective principles of instruction based on the evidence
- Differentiate instruction for all learners

What do **coaches** need to know to:

- Support teachers with implementation of effective instruction based on the evidence
- Support teachers in building their knowledge base
- Analyze school-wide student data to determine instructional plans and inform professional learning

What do **principals** need to know to:

- Lead and support the implementation building-wide
- Understand principles of effective literacy assessment, instruction, and outcomes
- Participate in data-based decision-making
- Empower coaches and teachers in their work through purchasing high-quality professional learning (and coaching) and curriculum resources
- Gauge what success looks like

What do **district administrators** need to know to:

- Lead and support the overall implementation district-wide
- Understand principles of effective literacy assessment, instruction, and outcomes
- Budget appropriately for system-wide professional learning (and coaching) and curriculum resources
- Measure and sustain success

Provide teachers with ongoing coaching and mentoring, and consider coaching and mentoring for yourself.

The research is clear that providing ongoing support and guidance is the key to transferring knowledge to practice. If your implementation involves new curricular resources, ensure that expert coaching is included so that teachers will maximize the use of the resources.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ELEMENTS	KNOWLEDGE LEVEL	SKILL ATTAINMENT	TRANSFER TO PRACTICE
Theory (presenter explains context)	10%	5%	0%
Demonstration (presenter models instructional practices)	30%	20%	0%
Practice (participants implement instructional practices during the session)	60%	60%	5%
Coaching (participants receive ongoing support and guidance when they return to the classroom)	95%	95%	95%

— Joyce & Showers (2002)

Adopt an ecosystem of proven curriculum resources that effectively and efficiently translates research to practice

Alignment

Consistency

Evidence

Acceleration

To achieve implementation stability, a critical step is installing the proper instructional resources. Courageous moves include:

- Holding high standards for efficacy and evidence when researching and choosing curricula, assessments, and resources. Ensure the high-quality instructional materials are in teachers' hands.
- Pulling weeds and planting flowers: be courageous in "de-implementation" of what is not effective or aligned with the evidence
- Remembering this is not an additive process; more does not equal better
- Selecting curriculum resources that are pedagogically aligned across all tiers of instruction, so that academic language, instructional protocols and routines, and lesson design are consistent. This provides additive, not replacement instruction for students across tiers, giving the increased time, intensity, and focus to students receiving intervention. The coherence and alignment allow students to immediately focus on the learning rather than procedures, maximizing instructional time and cognitive energy.
- Choosing resources that make teachers' lives easier and that support professional learning and growth through their use
- Ensuring that the resources are culturally and linguistically relevant, representing and affirming student identities



Continue to lead the vision

- Find those people who will be the internal coaches, mentors, and instructional leaders who will carry forth the vision and sustain the implementation from within.
- Promote a culture of transparency and vulnerability to engage in true problem-solving conversations.
- Remember that courageous leaders aren't afraid to ask questions and admit that they don't always have the answers.; then true trust in the process can emerge.
- Communication is vital to the success of the implementation; provide feedback loops and communicate tirelessly.

When leaders can align their actions with their intentions by both learning about evidence-aligned instruction and having a full picture of what's happening in classrooms through observation, then literacy is truly at the forefront of learning initiatives. The success of all students depends on everyone being on board.

By the end of this phase, staff are beginning to implement with fidelity.

“

If I am a lifelong learner, I never have it all figured out. I stay curious and I ask myself powerful questions. I ask other people powerful questions, and I realize that as an instructional leader, if I am not asking myself those tough questions, am I really creating an ecosystem where people can thrive and grow and transform?”

TRACY WHITE WEEDEN

President and CEO
Neuhaus Education Center

Full implementation

The implementation is in full swing—it is now considered “the way we do things at our school.” But having an implementation in full swing does not mean you lose sight of your original vision. Sustainable change requires the underlying structure, systems, and states of mind to uphold the vision. Leaders can move toward long-term stability by making a commitment to the fully realized implementation.

Courageous leader moves in the full implementation phase

Protect the vision by continuing to “make it visible”

You have set the vision and lived the vision. Now it is important to protect it. How? By making the mission visible always and to everyone. This doesn’t mean clever banners throughout the school, although that is not a bad thing. But to make the mission visible, start your meetings with reading the mission statement, put the mission statement on your written communication, engage in constant, transparent conversation with external partners in the community in addition to all internal invested parties (educators at all levels, administrators, parents, school board members, students), keeping everyone informed of the process and the progress, and celebrating achievement of goals. Communication is critical to sustaining your goals.

Inspect what you expect

Leaders know that observing in classrooms and providing teachers with useful, actionable feedback while also keeping a pulse on the overall school performance and culture are critical to a successful implementation. Here are ideas for criteria for which a school leader needs to continually inspect:

- Staff are implementing curricular resources with integrity. Integrity, rather than fidelity, is the goal; integrity implies that the resource is maximized for the benefit of instruction, which requires a continual focus on student response and the ability to adjust as needed.

- Staff are implementing evidence-aligned practices with precision. While resources serve instruction, it is the instruction that truly matters. With limited time each day to enact effective instruction, teachers need to know what [those high-impact practices are](#) and implement them with ease.
- Student outcomes are moving in the desired direction; gaps are closing.
- Support procedures are in place for continued success.
- Continuous data collection is used to improve the implementation.

Keep a pulse on school culture

The overall culture of a school is an important consideration as a new innovation is in play; a healthy culture will support the implementation overall and support the next phase of sustainability. Look-fors in a healthy school culture:

- ▶ All staff members, including leaders, are on collaborative teams (leadership, implementation, grade-level, intervention) and engaged in providing input and constructive feedback.
- ▶ All staff, including leaders, participate in collaborate problem-solving around data and instruction.
- ▶ Staff engage in courageous conversations about priorities and challenges.
- ▶ Communication is consistent, internally and externally.
- ▶ The expectation for continuous review, reflection, and possible revision is clear and in place.
- ▶ Staff shows willingness to be reflective:
 - Continually evaluating how teaching practices affect student outcomes
 - Critically assessing methods, classroom management, and student engagement
 - Using student data to engage in authentic examination of the diverse needs of all learners
 - Remaining open to exploring new ideas
 - Remaining open to continuous improvement and change
- ▶ Students are engaged and experience success (as a result of improved literacy outcomes, behavior issues are often mitigated).
- ▶ There is joy in the work, with a pervasive sense of optimism and hope.



Reflect

Continuous review and reflection drive the “next best steps” in the implementation. If you have set up Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and a collaborative problem-solving model, your staff is already in a healthy place of reflection. It is also important to reflect on the implementation as a holistic endeavor to determine if:



What we are doing is having the desired literacy outcomes that we established at the beginning of the journey



What, if any, shifts need to be made in the implementation plan to better meet those outcomes



People are still engaged and thriving in the initiative



What are the next steps for continued growth and innovation

Visionary leaders reflect on their own “courageous moves” from each phase of the implementation to drive that reflection and inform new directions. Questions that can assist you in this reflection:

- Are we seeing the change we identified as necessary in the exploration phase?
- Are the right people in the right seats all rowing together in the same direction?
- Are the assessments providing the data we need?
- Are the instructional materials effectively supporting instruction and getting results?
- Is there adequate time for our MTSS model?
- Is the professional learning, coaching, and mentoring having the desired effects? What are the next steps for experienced teachers? For new teachers?
- Am I building capacity for sustainability?

Sustainability

Establishing a fully-implemented, evidence-aligned, and evidence-based implementation within a community is challenging work, often taking multiple years. Courageous leaders know that the long-term survival and effectiveness of any initiative requires an intentional commitment to sustainability.

Courageous leader moves in the sustainability phase

Commit to hiring, training, and retaining the best

A high performing school or district begins with its people. A courageous leader sets high standards for hiring, seeking out teachers who come from preparation programs that utilize the contemporary and cutting-edge research to ensure future teachers know the research and are taught the evidence-aligned teaching methodologies so that they are fully prepared to teach students to read, to know what happens when students struggle, and have the skills to know what to do about it. In addition, these newly minted

teachers will require ongoing professional learning and mentoring. That level of support, combined with the relentless focus on student achievement is the key to teacher retention. People go into teaching to make a difference and to see their students thrive; if this is our commitment and we can deliver on that, teachers will want to come and will want to stay. Another good piece of advice is to remember our beginnings as teachers, and what we received or wish we had received to support us in those challenging and often fragile beginning years.

It is also of primary importance that leaders strive to hire a diverse staff that represents and understands the nuances of the student population.

Delegate to and invest in future leaders

“A leader is great not because of his or her power, but because of his or her ability to empower others.”

— John Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You*

These wise words remind us that our role as leaders is to value, empower, and invest in others. Not only do courageous leaders invest in developing internal coaches and mentors, but they identify and cultivate leadership. These future leaders need to be in place and walking alongside us to eventually take the reins and lead the next iteration of the vision.

This requires an often-difficult step for visionary leaders, which is delegation. And this isn't about delegating tasks, it's about delegating authority to others. Courageous leaders understand that the path to sustainability is being unafraid to trust others and to know they can be entrusted with the mission.

Just like our students, a “gradual release model” is a valuable consideration in making sure your future leaders are prepared. Investing in future leaders means ensuring they have the bandwidth to learn alongside you, develop their skills and knowledge through their own professional learning, and have time to reflect, plan, and envision the future.

You know who those people are; pursue them!

“A star wants to see himself rise to the top. A leader wants to see those around him rise to the top.”

— Simon Sinek



The biggest takeaway as a leader from this whole program is: How is it rolled out? Is it organized? Our schedules were dialed in and organized. We thought of everything that could go wrong and how to plan for it. For example, what happens if two of your aides call in sick that day? What do you do with groups? You don't cancel and this is how we're going to shift. We got in the weeds and figured out all the potential obstacles."

CHARLEY CLARK

Assistant Superintendent
Fairfax School District, CA

Remember "progress not perfection"

Transformative change is an ongoing process which may sometimes take a backward step. Remember that putting *a strong system underneath a big vision* makes the literacy implementation more likely to withstand inevitable ups and downs in the future.

Like transformative change, transformative leadership is also an ongoing process. One of the beautiful aspects of leadership is that it is dynamic, offering us opportunities to not only influence others, but to be always engaged in our own growth and flourishing. Remember that growth is never linear so give yourself grace, be patient with change, and live into the process. And never forget what a gift it is to LEAD LARGE in LITERACY on behalf of the students in our care.

Lighting the way for all learners

As an effective and purposeful courageous leader, you must have courage to get to know what your learners need and to advocate for every one of them, no matter what obstacles may be in your path.

Every child deserves access to the resources and instruction that meet them where they are and help them attain reading success and a literate life. Every child should feel included in what they are learning and know that it reflects and nurtures who they are as an individual and as part of a cultural community. Following are perspectives from two courageous leaders who have led the way in making this work happen in two key areas and whose insights will help you light the way for every child.

Empowering educators to lead with cultural responsiveness

MITCHELL BROOKINS, PHD

Literacy Leader and Educational Consultant,
Leading Educators



As educators, personalizing instruction around the way students arrive in the classroom has always been a priority. It is critical to consider whether your approach is culturally responsive, especially when teaching students of cultures different than your own. Here, Mitchell Brookins offers his distinct perspective on leading with cultural responsiveness in literacy education. This means aiming high for all students and embracing and inspiring others to know that all means all.

To begin this conversation, we must start here: knowledge begets knowledge. *To learn something, you have to know something.* A major premise of culturally relevant pedagogy is the understanding that a student's fund of knowledge is an asset. A student's fund of knowledge comprises the student's prior experiences, cultural knowledge, history, and background knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Essentially, a student's fund of knowledge represents the unique aspects of each student's identity.

Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes three core propositions of culturally relevant pedagogy: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Academic success is not just about making students feel good but [also] ensuring they attain academic proficiency in literacy. Cultural competence ensures students do not strip away their identities to partake in classroom learning. Finally, critical consciousness is creating learning opportunities where students critique societal norms to identify inequities in the system with the aim of producing active, literate citizens.

A fundamental principle of culturally relevant pedagogy is leveraging students' background knowledge as a conduit to academic learning. By interrogating our

curricular resources, instructional practices, assessment tools, staffing models, and overall student experience, **we will get closer to advancing literacy for all**. Here are five things leaders need to know *and* DO when leading the way for culturally relevant pedagogy.

1. Selecting curricular resources

Texts are the center of the work in the ELA classroom. They provide mirrors and windows into the human experience and phenomena. We leverage complex texts to build students' literacy and intellect. Thus, text selection is critical to culturally responsive classrooms. Tatum (2014) challenges us to use texts that have the power to shape and empower students' well-being. Along with using text complexity rubrics to assess text challenges, teachers should analyze the content, concepts, and text features to assess if they represent comprehensive, affirming examples of students' identities. Hammond (2014) charges us not to allow coping skills utilized to navigate racial and economic caste systems to be seen as cultural markers of minoritized groups. It is critical to ensure that texts do not reinforce stereotypes but provide a window into students' rich histories. Culturally relevant texts are integral to a literacy curriculum that seeks to build skilled readers.

2. Instructional practices

Culturally relevant teachers use affirming, asset-based language while interacting with students. When students use their home language, instead of asserting student error, teachers could use contrastive analysis techniques (Al-Sobhi, 2019). For example, they could use phoneme-grapheme mapping to build mastery of letter-sound correspondences. When trying to support students in internalizing subject-matter knowledge, teachers should leverage students' funds of knowledge (i.e., prior experiences) and connect them to the new knowledge. Use real-world examples from youth culture to accelerate the storage of content-area learning into long-term memory. Connecting prior knowledge to new knowledge is actually the way our brain processes information. Thus, teachers don't have to shy away from difficult topics; leaning into them can be pivotal in accelerating literacy learning.

3. Assessment

We must be mindful of how our schoolwide assessment system perpetuates inequities. Washington and Seidenberg (2021) challenge us to consider how standardized

assessment instruments have been found to lack cultural sensitivity with speakers of language varieties. Are your foundational skills screeners, diagnostics, and progress monitoring culturally sensitive to distinct features of various languages and dialects? If not, you risk over-identification for special education services and/or developing intervention plans that don't address the true student need. Even more concerning is the lack of accountability surrounding the literacy assessment results of minoritized students. When confronted with an opportunity gap between white and non-white peers, teachers must interrogate the root causes and disrupt them. Academic success is a fundamental proposition of culturally relevant pedagogy. So, if students are not becoming skilled readers, one is not aligned with the core principles of culturally relevant pedagogy.

4. Staffing

Hale (2001) found that white teachers in urban schools, who differ socially and economically from their students, tend to have low expectations and are more inclined to see black students' failure due to class and racial backgrounds. Teachers' pre-existing stereotypes may hinder positive relationships with black students (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). Low expectations and non-rigorous learning experiences have led to black boys having disproportionately experienced more tracking into low-ability groups, held in lower academic regard by their teachers, and underperformance on tests (Gordon et al., 2009; Oakes, 1990; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Our system's historical legacy of discipline policies and cultural incongruence between teachers and students is real. Creating a diverse staff that understands the cultural nuances of a student population, coupled with ongoing professional learning, supports building team efficacy in addressing the growing cultural differences between teachers and students.

5. Student experience

As I close, I would be remiss if I did not end with the most important factor of culturally relevant pedagogy: the student experience. Students should be free to bring their whole selves to the classroom. There should be no stripping of identities to assimilate into one's classroom culture. Students and practitioners build and shape their classroom culture by collectively valuing, affirming, and harnessing each other's intellect as they develop into literate citizens. We must not only honor who our students are, but we must use who they are to advance literacy attainment. This work will look different depending on whether the aim is language or knowledge acquisition. This work will vary based on the funds of knowledge present in the classroom. But to that end, we are all responsible for delivering on the promise of skilled reading, and so, I'll leave with you a charge from the American Library Association: *Let Freedom Read!*

Teacher preparation: Special considerations for leading change for English learners



ANTONIO FIERRO, EdD

Vice President of Professional Learning and Academics,
95 Percent Group

Antonio Fierro, EdD, has applied his many years as literacy expert and as practitioner in the classroom to help schools and districts to be prepared to teach reading to every student, regardless of previous experience or native language. Here he shares the actions courageous leaders in higher education must take to prepare their educators to teach their English Learners effectively.

There has been a positive shift in our field of education, acknowledging and incorporating scientific insights into the teaching and learning of reading. This shift has included English Learners, as was evident with the release of [The Reading League's Joint Statement](#).

I was part of this historic convening of experts that occurred in early 2023, and once and for all brought all camps and viewpoints together to acknowledge that a comprehensive body of reading knowledge exists, and it is a body of knowledge that is also relevant to the instruction provided to our nation's English Learners. According to the Joint Statement (The Reading League, 2023), *"this knowledge should be embraced and applied to inform instruction, complemented by understanding and addressing the social, linguistic, and cultural factors that impact students."*

Taking action

Now that the field has agreed on the knowledge base needed by teachers working with English learners, The Reading League's Joint Statement can serve as the necessary catalyst to reconfigure EPPs (educator preparation programs) across the country. First and foremost, I propose that courageous leaders in higher education take action to ensure the following:

1. Coursework that includes:

- The principles specific to the psychology of reading.
- High-quality textbooks that cover phonics instruction, phonemic awareness, fluency, oral language development, comprehension strategies, and the cognitive processes involved in reading that can also drive lesson scaffolding and differentiation.
- All elements specific to the teaching of English learners, including oral or spoken language acquisition and development (form, use, and content). Because of high variability factors among English learners, oral language must be the common fabric across all subject matter being learned.
- The targeted teaching of all language systems (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, oral and written discourse, and orthography) and how they, too, should be incorporated across all content and subject matter.
- How to align assessments with the specific goals and needs of English learners, considering factors such as age, language proficiency levels, and cultural background.

Processes needed to either enhance or include parent and community engagement.

2. Field practice that includes working with English learners and skilled teachers delivering effective and scaffolded instruction.

3. An introductory course dedicated only to the teaching of English learners that covers key concepts, strategies, and methods that educators can use to support the language development and academic success of students who are learning to read and write in English and the considerable variability among all English learners.

Bureaucracies can never be eliminated, but the processes universities and colleges must undertake when making changes to course requirements to better reflect current research findings must be significantly expedited. *The procedures needed for change should never be the reason not to pursue it.*



We have a way to go, but the future does indeed look bright. The field, overall, has embraced a shift not based on the latest trend but one supported and driven by science. Do we have all the answers? Of course not, but the path to getting those answers continues to be paved by evidence of what works and the scaffolds that must be in place for all our students. *All means all.*

We must never lose sight of the fact that until reading instruction serves all students equally, we are shortchanging entire groups of students and society as a whole. Most importantly, we must advocate for teacher preparation programs that send educators out into the world with the skills they need to *ensure success for every child in every classroom*, regardless of “the language they are loved in” (to quote my mentor, Dr. Louisa Moats).

(Excerpted and adapted from “[Ensuring Equity in Reading Instruction](#)” in *Language Magazine*)



Profiles in courage: Successful literacy leaders

“

A transformational leader is someone who influences people to think, to speak and to act in such a way that it makes a positive impact in their lives AND the lives of others.”

JOHN C. MAXWELL

Bestselling author, coach, and speaker

Louisa Moats, EdD

Author, speaker, literacy advocate



“Transformational change requires being unafraid to act on your convictions, having a vision of what is possible, and not giving up when the going gets rough if you know that what you are pursuing is right and valuable.”

Three tips for courageous leadership

1. Have relentless conviction that you're doing the right thing.
2. Name and actualize a vision.
3. Find the courage to lead toward it.

Why Dr. Moats is a literacy leader

Louisa Moats, EdD, did not take a traditional path to educational leadership. Her career, long and distinguished, led her through research, clinical work, university teaching, and eventually authorship. Dr. Moats has been in the classroom feeling inadequate, helpless, and ineffective—experiences that led her to champion the importance of teacher education. Her belief that all children deserve to and can learn to read, write, and spell—and that with the right, ongoing education, all teachers can learn how to successfully teach them—led to Dr. Moats's creation of *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling® (LETRS®)*, which has changed the trajectory of teacher education in [foundational literacy skills](#).

Find More Here

[Watch Part 2 of the webinar](#) with Laura Stewart and Louisa Moats now!



Mitchell Brookins, PhD

Educational Consultant, Leading Educators

Words to live by

“It’s not just knowledge about the science of reading. Leaders need knowledge of adult learning. They’re working with adults ...leaders need to know how to lead a change effort. They need to know how to work with people. Leaders are capacity builders, so as much as I have to arm them with the knowledge of the science of reading, I have to arm them also with the capacity building skills, right? That’s where I start with school leaders because you can’t lead something that you don’t know anything about.”

“When, as a school administrator, a 5th grader came to me and said, ‘I want to be like everybody else, and I want to learn how to read.’ As the leader of that school, I had to step back and take a moment and say, ‘I owe you that much. You don’t deserve to be in 5th grade and not able to read. My school has failed you, and I have failed you as a leader.’ I know that I’m a part of that system, and I can’t just say, Oh, the system! The system! It’s the system. No, I am the system. That’s why I’m impassioned about it.... So, how do we change some of this? First, it must start with us. We have to say enough is enough. We have to be able to say that it is unacceptable ... I think that to me, that is the first step of moving in a different direction—of saying that this is not okay. Time for a change.”

Three tips for leading change

1. You need an in-depth understanding of how adults learn.
2. You need to go into the classrooms and gather observational data about teacher performance. This allows you to create evidence-based professional learning.
3. Both teachers and leaders need to know how to gather, analyze, and use data to set short-term goals to get quick feedback about progress.

Why Dr. Brookins is a literacy leader

Mitchell Brookins, PhD, began his teaching career as a student teacher in a 3rd-grade classroom in Chicago. The head teacher retired at the end of the school year, and Dr. Brookins worked hard to prove he could handle the job. Eventually moving from classroom teacher to an RTI literacy coach at the district level, he soon realized that he missed working in a school building. So, he went back to support teachers in their literacy journey.

Find more here

[Check out Mitchell's three-part coverage of a webinar with Laura Stewart here!](#)

Danielle ‘Nell’ Thompson, PhD, CCC-SLP, and Terrie Noland, PhD, CALP

Dr. Thompson: Founder and President, The Transformative Reading Teacher Group; Chair, The Big Sky Literacy Summit

Dr. Noland: Vice President of Educator Initiatives, Learning Ally



Words to live by

“Literacy transformation will only happen if the individuals leading the change fully understand the challenges they face, help others understand those challenges, grow their own leadership abilities, and build a team of great leaders that hold and sustain the necessary, long-term change.

“There are many reasons why literacy must become a priority and stay a priority. These reasons extend well beyond reading an assigned

text and completing homework for a grade. For complete literacy transformation to occur, the future of a school community must be defined by a vision that requires intentional and daily work. Solidifying and strengthening literacy for all students has a long-term positive impact on the future of our country.

“Literacy leadership is a pivotal element in shaping the educational landscape and driving societal progress. A strong literacy leader not only ensures that students acquire essential reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills but also nurtures a culture of lifelong learning, not only among students, but among colleagues.... When a deep understanding of literacy combines with the understanding of what it means to lead, there is a beautiful convergence that will drive literacy change forward.”

Three tips for leading change

1. *Make literacy a priority.* Leaders who consistently focus on literacy, along with all other initiatives, set a compelling example for ... students, their fellow educators, and their communities.
2. *See leadership not as a position, but as a disposition.* Leadership is about modeling personal growth and knowledge building together as a learning community with educators. Leadership is the ability to connect, guide, inspire, and influence others to achieve shared goals that move everyone towards a bigger vision in shared trust.
3. *Literacy leaders must realize and become fully aware of the wobbles of literacy leadership and know how to counteract those wobbles with an appropriate move.* Allowing downhill habits of task management to control daily work is a wobble that needs to be tackled. Courageous literacy leaders recognize this action and will become intentional about focusing time and attention on actionable steps towards literacy transformation.

Why Dr. Thompson is a literacy leader

Danielle ‘Nell’ Thompson, PhD, CCC-SLP, is a coach, influencer for literacy change, literacy leader, teacher of teachers, and insatiably curious about all things that make people’s lives better. She is an

agent of positive change working to help leaders and educators re-think, unlearn, and up-level their knowledge, leadership skills, instructional practices, and collective impact. From her rural roots in North Dakota to her time spent as a Peace Corps volunteer in a school for the deaf, she spent a decade working as a PreK–12 speech language pathologist and educator in Colorado, Montana, and Alaska public schools. And then one day, Dr. Nell realized she needed to do more for those who could not read and who were not being reached due to broken systems. She became a research scientist, one of the original national LETRS trainers, and studied leadership. Currently, she reaches, teaches, and leads educators and leaders as the President and Founder of The Transformative Reading Teacher Group, President of The Reading League Montana, a Certified High-Performance Coach, a Maxwell Certified Leadership Speaker and Coach, and the Founder and creative force for change behind The Big Sky Literacy Summit.

Why Dr. Noland is a literacy leader

For 27 years, Terrie Noland, PhD, CALP, has put her energy into leadership and literacy, first as a teacher and administrator and now as a national Literacy Leader. Dr. Noland mentors leaders about the latest research around the science of reading and the leadership characteristics to leave a legacy. She speaks to crowds to offer captivating stories, leadership principles, research, and best literacy practices, which she always delivers with inspiration. Dr. Noland is a Certified Academic Language Practitioner and has her PhD in literacy. She is Maxwell Leadership Certified and a President's Advisory Council member. She has experience building award-winning communities of educators to lead large in literacy and professional learning experiences that drive high-leverage growth for administrators and educators.

Find more here

[Read Nell and Terrie's Full Post!](#)



Mike Looney, EdD

Superintendent, Fulton County Schools, Ga.



Words to live by

"All students matter, and all students come first. We make sure that we're giving all students what they need ... students cannot be successful in life, or in school unless they can read. In order to do this, we retrenched our training program, and our resource programs, to make sure that we're focused on best practices, things that have been proven to work for students from all backgrounds."

Three tips for leading change

1. *Offer all invested parties a common language based in the science of reading—from leaders and coaches to teachers and students.* To work together more seamlessly, educators need to be on the same page. Training all stakeholders means it's easier to identify and collaborate to help students that need critical support, because everyone speaks the same language.
2. *Anchor literacy learning in structure and clear expectations.* When solid routines are in place, this lightens the cognitive load for both students and teachers—freeing up more space for the important instruction needed for everyone to achieve grade-level reading.
3. *Build a safe, trustworthy place for everyone to learn and grow in their practice.* Normalize continual learning and support for everyone in the school community. One of the ultimate goals of achieving reading success is to foster lifelong learning.

Why Dr. Looney is a literacy leader

Mike Looney, EdD, joined Fulton County School District in 2019 and helped guide the district through the COVID-19 pandemic while emphasizing early childhood reading skills, real-life career experience, and STEM innovations, and reducing dropouts.

The district superintendent knows what it's like to feel unprepared to teach reading in the classroom: "My first year teaching, I had a 4th-grade student that was illiterate. I remember feeling hopeless." Dr. Looney believes that the institution of education hasn't done a good enough job preparing teachers to be successful. Dr. Looney's leadership is changing the way people think about literacy and how kids learn how to read at the 4th-largest district in the state of Georgia—and is nothing short of courageous.

Find more here

[See Dr. Looney's video blog on transformational literacy leadership!](#)



Kymyona Burk, EdD, and Kelly Butler

Dr. Burk: Senior Policy Fellow, ExcelinEd; former Mississippi state literacy director

Ms. Butler: CEO, Barksdale Reading Institute



Words to live by

"It is critical to communicate with all partners. We all have a stake in this."

Three tips for leading change

1. *It helps to have one or more champions stepping out to declare a commitment to change.* Try to work together with one or more of the following: a philanthropist, the state superintendent of education, a school board member, legislature, or governor; even a parent group. At this point, many legislators (spurred by parents or the success of other states) are the ones getting the ball rolling!

2. *Communication is key.* Our strategy was to bolster communication about the support that would be provided to teachers and administrators, parents and families, and students, and focus on these supports that would prevent or intervene for reading difficulties. The literacy team, in partnership with school districts, hosted in-person parent nights across the state each year to ensure that parents were informed about parental notification of reading deficiencies, parent resources to support reading at home, good cause exemptions, and how to partner with teachers.
3. *The approach must be comprehensive with state guidance for best practices and boots-on-the ground support.* Other critical components—professional development, funding, high-quality instructional materials—must also be present and intentionally implemented.

Why they're literacy leaders

Although many have called the successful literacy transformation in Mississippi a “miracle,” the truth is it was the result of a clear vision and a sustained, dedicated effort by many people. Two of those courageous individuals, Kymyona Burke, EdD, former Mississippi state literacy director and current senior policy fellow at ExcelinEd, and Kelly Burke, CEO of the Barksdale Reading Institute, offered us insight into what made their effort possible.

Much of what they revealed pointed to clear communication and strong support from independent advocates. “We have shared specific aspects of our [the BRI] model: essential role of coaches, importance of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), appropriate assessments, and purposeful interventions that we believed were critical impact levers in our work leading up to the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, or LBPA. We point to the strategic roles of others in the process: a strong State Education Agency (SEA) leader, an effective and competent state literacy department, and a legislature willing to fund what was being mandated.”

Find more here

[Check out their full webinar](#) or read more about their work in Mississippi in this [95 Percent Group Experts Corner interview!](#)



Rob Freil, EdD, and Brian Cromer, EdD

Dr. Freil: Assistant Superintendent,
South Western School District, Penn.

Dr. Cromer: Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment,
South Western School District, Penn.



Words to live by

“Vision with patience”

Three tips for leading change

1. *Develop a common vision* and a strategic plan of action for change.
2. *Work backwards to figure out what you need* and then build a team that will stay focused on getting to your vision.
3. *Always look to the horizon:* think about what you want to have in place in five years and then have the patience to create the structures, systems, and replicable routines that hold up the vision and will facilitate sustainability.

Why they're literacy leaders

Before taking on their current positions, Brian Cromer, EdD, was a K–5 elementary principal for 16 years, eventually culminating in two years as both the elementary supervisor and building principal, and Rob Freil, EdD, served as the director of curriculum before moving into his current role as assistant superintendent. Over the past three years, the team of elementary administrators and teachers in the South Western School District have diligently focused on ELA Scope and Sequence development. This leadership group designed



and built a literacy framework, utilized *Understanding by Design Process* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) for curriculum development, and identified core resources to support the written curriculum.

They have slowly and methodically led and supported the entire district through transformational literacy change and contend that moving slowly and putting the right systems into place is the only way to stay aligned to your vision long term.

Transformational literacy change at scale: Examples of successful districts

Edgecombe County Public Schools

After digging deep into Edgecombe County Public School's literacy data, Director of Elementary and Preschool Programs, Lutashia Dove, EdD, knew that both teachers and students needed something different for foundational reading skills. Specifically, she realized that the challenges students faced in grades 3–5 were due to gaps in their K–2 literacy instruction. They needed a stronger phonics curriculum.

Six months into the school year, Edgecombe's subtests are telling a story of success and growth. For example, only 18 percent of last year's kindergarten students scored on grade level in Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) and Phonemic Segmentation Fluency (PSF) at the Middle of the Year (MOY) assessment. This year, as 1st graders, 45 percent of the same students scored on grade level in LNF and PSF.

SNAPSHOT

- Located in eastern rural North Carolina
- 5,400 students K–12
- Six elementary schools
- One elementary school piloting 95 Phonics Core Program® across K–5

[Read the whole story here!](#)

“

When you ask students about what they're learning and they can talk the talk—they have the vocabulary, they can speak about the practices and the routines—when you can have those conversations with 1st graders? It's not typical. They're talking about decoding and identifying consonants and vowels: they are having these conversations. And the excitement in students when it's time to do phonics, they're excited, they're ready. They're learning.”

LUTASHIA DOVE

Director of Elementary and Preschool Programs
Edgecombe Public Schools, NC

Val Verde Unified School District

SNAPSHOT

- Located in California
- 20,000 students in 21 schools
- ~80% Hispanic population
- 80–85% free and reduced lunch
- ~20% EL
- 11–12% special education

For several years, Val Verde Unified School District has been on a journey to strategically implement practices based in the science of reading in their classrooms. Although they faced several challenges in improving student reading outcomes, Val Verde’s journey with 95 Percent Group highlights the importance of evidence-based, data-driven instruction, ongoing support, and a commitment to equitable education for all students.

Val Verde began by implementing 95 Percent Group’s Tier 2 intervention solutions—like the 95 Phonics Screener for Intervention™, 95 Phonics Chip Kit™, and the 95 Phonics Lesson Library™—at scale. As their students progressed with 95 Percent Group’s products, Val Verde’s educators gained clarity on their students’ reading challenges when they began to see gaps they hadn’t seen before. They soon realized that they didn’t have an intervention problem—they had a literacy curriculum that hadn’t been implemented with fidelity and that wasn’t moving enough students toward grade-level success. Literacy leaders took a step back to determine what teachers needed to equitably implement the Tier 1 reading curriculum across classrooms and schools. While they acknowledged that this was a difficult decision to make, district leaders knew that to enact change within the whole system, they had to make sure their Tier 1 curriculum instruction was their “first best instruction.” If students weren’t getting their best instruction until they needed intervention, then something wasn’t right.

[Read the whole story here!](#)

Fulton County School District

Superintendent of Fulton County Schools, Mike Looney, EdD, believes the diversity of his unique school district is what sets it apart. “All students matter, and all students come first,” Dr. Looney says. “And we have become very, very adept at making sure that we can meet the unique challenges of individual students.”

Dr. Looney explains how Fulton County Schools set about making sure all their students get the education they need and deserve: “We retrenched our training program, and our resource programs, to make sure that we’re focused on best practices, things that have been proven to work for students from all backgrounds.”

The proof of Fulton County Schools’ success is in the data: 2nd-grade students using 95 Phonics Core Program at Asa Hilliard Elementary grew as much as 46 percent from their first assessment at the beginning of the year to their third assessment mid-year. These 2nd graders scored at 63 percent proficient in fall of 2022, but 92 percent proficient after only five months of instruction.

“We have to make sure that we’re giving all students what they need,” says Dr. Looney. “Students cannot be successful in life, or in school, unless they can read.”

[Read the whole story here!](#)

SNAPSHOT

- Fourth biggest district in Georgia (Atlanta metro area)
- 14,000 employees and 90,000 students
- 59 elementary schools
- 49% minority enrollment
- 31% free and reduced lunch

Strategic forward.



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PAM HERRERA

Director of Elementary In
Dover, DE

Emboldening leaders to act: The stance you'll take and the journey you'll make

Taking the first step is often the most difficult part of the implementation journey. A powerful first step for many leaders is to surround themselves with a team that will help to ground and carry the vision—even and especially when it's challenging. A strong team includes people who can think critically about tough decisions, offer perspective and feedback where it's most needed, and help support the big, transformative changes sometimes required to act on a courageous plan.

Rob Freil and Brian Cromer, courageous leaders at South Western School District in Hanover, Pennsylvania, moved through a successful literacy implementation and offer a look at the steps they took to unlock literacy for all their students.

The arc of an implementation: One district's journey to transformational literacy change

SNAPSHOT

South Western School District

- Located in Hanover, Penn. (south central Penn.)
- 4,700 students K-12
- 2,000 K-5 students across four elementary schools
- Two elementary schools are 50% free and reduced lunch (Title 1)
- Two elementary schools are 30% free and reduced lunch

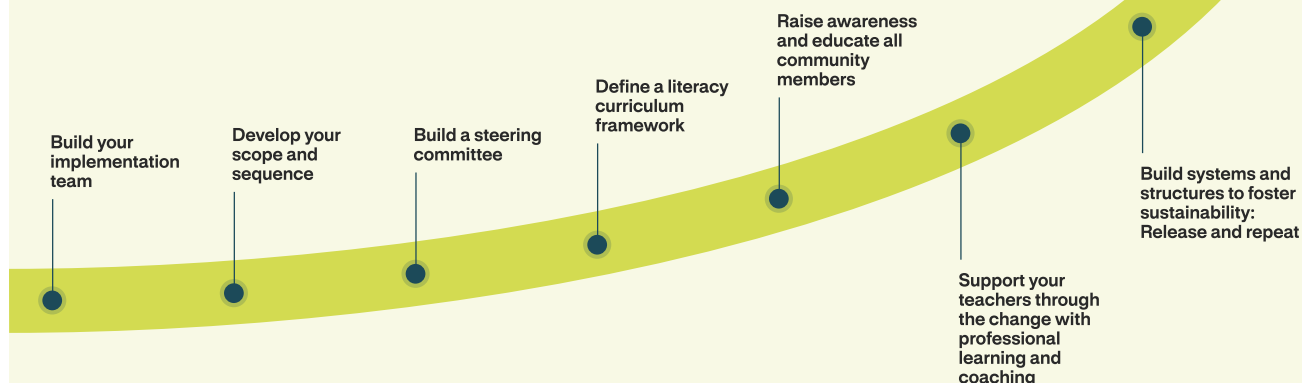
South Western School District's playbook for implementing transformational literacy change

Before launching a change in the way South Western School District taught reading, Brian Cromer, now the director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and Rob Freil, now assistant superintendent, were working side by side on curriculum for years. In pre-pandemic 2020, they created a vision of how they wanted to change the design of literacy curriculum districtwide. They knew the journey would be long and were determined to make the process meaningful for all involved.

In fall of 2023, they put a new phonics curriculum in every elementary classroom, K-5, across their four elementary schools.

The following page illustrates how they moved through a community-wide implementation while staying grounded in their vision and dedicated to unlocking literacy for all of their students.

The arc of implementation



“

We were very strategic about developing a plan of action with change because we both feel very strongly that change cannot occur immediately. It has to be well thought out, and you have to have the end in mind. Then you can think about what you ultimately want, work backwards from there, and build out the small details of what you need to do, who needs to be involved and when, and what your timeline will be for each part.”

BRIAN CROMER

Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
South Western School District, PA

Build your implementation team.

An important part of making the process meaningful for all was including as many stakeholders as possible during different phases of the implementation. This meant they could cast a wide net, bringing in groups of grade-level leaders, reading specialists, and principals to work on focused tasks for about three months—using a defined timeline to avoid any group of educators feeling overwhelmed or stretched thin. This strategy also resulted in a variety of voices offering input on the process.



Develop your scope and sequence.

Dr. Cromer and Dr. Freil also created knowledge, skill, and performance assessment scope and sequence charts that inventoried everything the district currently had in place and how it addressed national and state standards at the K-5 grade levels. These powerful documents—along with the expertise of district reading specialists engaged in LETRS®—ensured that foundational literacy skills would be addressed.

Build a steering committee.

Another group of educators used the scope and sequence documents to move forward with a defined literacy philosophy, asking questions like: *What does literacy mean to us? Why are we focused on it? How do we incorporate a curriculum that attends to what the evidence base shows us?* Part of this work included building a timeline for how they would move forward with developing curriculum, mapping skills, and then identifying core resources.

Define a literacy curriculum framework.

The next group of educators mapped the process by determining what skills were needed at every grade level and how they aligned with national and state standards. Once the map was in place, another group addressed core resource selection—finding the best resource for what their students needed.

Raise awareness and educate all community members.

District and school leaders had many months of build-up before making any big changes. This slow and strategic implementation made it possible to introduce changes to the school community at each stage, making it feel like nothing changed overnight.

Part of the reason behind this slow, systematic process was also to provide time to determine how to best communicate the changes with families—relying heavily on the relationships between the central office and building principals for help to do so. After identifying the core resources and beginning to implement them in grades K–5, communication to student families helped them understand what they would receive, why it looked different, and what they could expect in the coming months.

“

We were working on shifting the mindset of the teachers, but they aren’t the only stakeholders in this game.”

BRIAN CROMER

Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
South Western School District, PA

Support your teachers through the change with professional learning and coaching.

Leaving behind a familiar curriculum to jump into something entirely new can be difficult and intimidating for teachers who are already balancing many demands on their time. To counter this, implementation leaders offered not only initial onsite training but also virtual training, Q&As, and ongoing coaching sessions. This support, spread throughout the year, let teachers know that they had allies in making sure they were confident in their practice.



The professional learning has been key to feeling comfortable and feeling successful where we are now. We got what we needed at the time we needed it. Coaching sessions meant having someone who can really help mold the program to your needs and then help you see it in action. When you can see that, you think, ‘Oh, OK. I can do this. Here’s what this should look like.’”

JENNIFER BEARD

5th-Grade Teacher
South Western School District, PA

Build systems and structures to foster sustainability: Release and repeat.

Ensuring that the hard work of an implementation will sustain the impact and student growth for years to come is daunting. According to Dr. Cromer and Dr. Freil, one of the most important parts of an implementation plan is building systems and structures so that they can support the vision into the future.



So many layers underneath the success of an implementation are the structures of how we do the design process that transcend all content areas. We are dedicated to remaining attentive to those systems, to having things on cycles, and having leadership structures in place to support all pieces of the curriculum design cycle. Also, to constant growth: in terms of research and what's happening in the field to make sure that we are staying aware of those upcoming trends and things that we may need to change so we can bring it into our design work. The entire cycle of our curriculum work is built around constantly looking at what is happening next. How does it line up with our program?"

ROB FREIL

Assistant Superintendent
South Western School District, PA

Measuring success and what it looks like

There are many ways to measure success. In schools, it's common to look only at the big picture: composite assessment scores 1–3 times a year. However, there are many more nuances to evaluating whether an initiative is creating forward momentum. Sometimes, it's data. Other times, it's paying closer attention to human behavior and looking at how students are responding to the change.

The first thing to remember is that children inherently want to learn. They are naturally curious. Educators strive for the “sweet spot” of enough challenge to be interesting, but not so much that students can't sustain their effort; this is where change moves quickly. When students aren't engaged in what they're learning, they begin acting out, their attendance suffers, and they often refuse to participate in the very things that will help them.

The real transformation: When children feel successful



Of all the new programs I have been asked to implement, 95 Percent Group is by far my favorite. It has made the most sense. It was so easy to make the change because it works. It gets kids reading, and it also helps them enjoy it.”

JULIE GROCE

1st-Grade Teacher
Gallardo Elementary School, TX

Much of the time, student disengagement is due to a lack of foundational skills. Once they receive direct and explicit instruction that allows them to read on their own, their self-confidence soars, attendance goes up, and behavior [referrals wane](#). Children *want* to be in class because they feel successful for the first time—they feel they can do it.

Countless stories from schools using 95 Phonics Core Program indicate that their young students are excited to engage in phonics instruction, and to use the vocabulary in conversations with each other and with their teachers. It’s an entirely new experience for everyone.

These human measurements are the real measurements of success that predict a different future—a future where critical reading and thinking are the foundation of learning for *all* children.



Data matters, and changes in test scores will appear first in the subtests with fast progress in the accuracy of decoding: *correct letter sounds and nonsense word reading*. Students' accuracy and automaticity will help them develop speed first and then fluency later. Progress-monitoring practice will be the ticket to both the celebration of progress and to *small, evidence-based, instructional decisions* that empower your teachers to keep moving forward.

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About the author

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Chief Academic Officer, 95 Percent Group

Laura Stewart is a nationally recognized literacy advocate, author, and expert who is building 95 Percent Group's thought leadership position in the literacy market. Laura has dedicated her career to improving literacy achievement as a teacher and administrator and at leading education companies including The Reading League, Highlights Education Group, and Rowland Reading Foundation.

The courage to unlock literacy for every child

Transformational literacy change like this requires courageous leadership. With the science of reading behind you, a trusted team around you, and the right next steps, you will lead your community toward a future where all your students can receive the instruction and support they need to become readers.

Just beginning this journey?
Check out a [curated toolkit](#) to inform your next steps!



Toolkit

Want to [learn more](#) about how 95 Percent Group can support your journey to unlocking literacy for all?



Contact us

Take action now to lead transformational change in your district!

About 95 Percent Group

95 Percent Group is an education company whose mission is to build on science to empower teachers—supplying the knowledge, resources, and support they need—to develop strong readers. Using an approach that is based in structured literacy, the company’s One95 Literacy Ecosystem™ integrates professional learning and evidence-based literacy products into one cohesive system that supports consistent instructional routines across tiers and is proven and trusted to help students close skill gaps and read fluently. 95 Percent Group is also committed to advancing research, best practices, and thought leadership on the science of reading more broadly. For more information, visit www.95percentgroup.com.

