

THE LITERACY CRISIS IN LOS ANGELES AND BEYOND:

**A PROBLEM WE CAN AND MUST
COLLECTIVELY SOLVE**



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**Once you learn to
read, you will be
forever free.**

Frederick Douglass

”

FOREWORD

Dear Readers,

It is with a sense of urgency and determination that I present to you this landscape report on the early literacy crisis in Los Angeles. In the heart of one of the most vibrant and diverse cities in the world, this long-standing crisis threatens the very foundation of our children's futures and the future of our city. The ability to read is not merely a skill; it is a gateway to knowledge, empowerment, and, yes, freedom.

Unfortunately, a significant number of our children – not just in LA, but across California – face barriers that hinder their path to literacy and, consequently, limit their potential and future success. Just 40% of children attending schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District can read proficiently by the end of third grade, a foundational marker of school success. For children living in poverty, Black or Latino kids, or English learners, the data are even more troubling, ranging from 33% to 9%. Statewide, the data tell a similar story: fewer than half of all children are proficient readers.

With over two decades of work elevating family voice and family engagement in schools, and with its origins in early literacy, Families In Schools is committed to building a movement to end our literacy crisis. We stand with families who are deeply concerned that their children cannot read. They understand – even if some of them never learned to read, like my own father – that reading matters; that if their children cannot read, it is essentially game over. This is why we have launched ReadLA!, a campaign to ensure all Los Angeles children can read and thrive.

Los Angeles Unified, the largest school district in the region and state serving almost 540,000 students, is a vital partner in this endeavor. Despite the lack of a comprehensive state literacy policy and supports, the district is systematically aligning literacy instruction with the science of reading – a critical component to addressing the literacy crisis. This report recognizes and commends these initial steps and small but hopeful progress, while urging further commitment to ensure the widespread and sustained adoption of evidence-based practices. Building on the momentum initiated by the district, our recommendations extend beyond the classroom walls to implore local and state leaders, as well as parents, to join in elevating early literacy as a top priority.

We hope that ReadLA! – and our call for all of us to work together to address a problem that CAN be solved – unites us as a city on behalf of all children. And we hope our resolve, leadership, and conviction that all children deserve to be “forever free” positions Los Angeles and California as a beacon of literacy, equity, and opportunity for all its children.

Sincerely,



Yolie Flores, President & CEO
Families In Schools

INTRODUCTION

Every parent wants their child to become a good reader. And, equipped with the right resources and supports starting at birth, every child is capable of learning to read.

Reading on grade level by the end of third grade is a critical milestone; research has repeatedly shown that it is one of the strongest predictors of student success.¹ There is a clear link between not reading proficiently by the end of third grade, experiencing other academic challenges in school, not graduating on time from high school, and struggling financially in adulthood, to name just a few.² In short, reading is necessary for success in school and life – and therefore a fundamental civil right.

And yet, too few students across Los Angeles Unified (LAUSD) and California are meeting reading standards. Further, the students who are most behind are disproportionately Black and Latino, English learners, and students from low-income backgrounds – underscoring a significant inequity that we have a moral obligation to address.

To be clear, low reading performance is not a reflection of our students' abilities or our families' desires for their children. Rather, it is a reflection of a longstanding failure to create coherent systems and approaches to reading instruction;

a lack of educator training aligned to science-based reading approaches; limited family supports and early learning opportunities; a lack of collective belief that we can create positive change from the individual to systemic level; and a failure to act with a sense of urgency.



Reading is more than an activity; it's a lifeline that all students will need in life. When we're driving, walking down the street, shopping for groceries, taking care of important personal needs, etc.— if a child doesn't read proficiently beginning at an early age, we can't expect them to do these essential everyday tasks, let alone reach their educational or employment potential and goals after high school.

- Parent



¹ When we say "reading," we include the broader concepts of literacy such as fluency, comprehension, and writing.

² <https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-EarlyWarningConfirmed-2013.pdf>

Fortunately, decades of research have led to our understanding of what constitutes effective reading instruction, and that the science of reading provides the roadmap to do so. We also have a vast body of research on the additional layers of support that particular groups of students, such as English learners (ELs),³ need to become flourishing readers. Los Angeles Unified – the largest school district in Los Angeles County and the state of California – began embracing science of reading principles in recent years with the goal of achieving stronger literacy outcomes going forward. Still, there is much work to do in ensuring these efforts lead to concrete literacy improvements in every classroom, for every student.

In this landscape report, we share background on the decades-long literacy crisis through data, the voices of parents and teachers, and existing literacy efforts across LAUSD and California. We illuminate how the science of reading is key to addressing the literacy crisis, and we put forth a set of policy and practice recommendations for educational and other key partners to ensure that solving the literacy crisis is a collective effort inside and outside the classroom. By sharing this information, we aim to build a movement in Los Angeles and across California that calls for the structures and resources necessary to ensure all students are reading on grade level by the end of third grade.



Reading to my own children was not just a joy but a meaningful bridge to a brighter future, especially considering my own mom’s limited literacy since she never went beyond a third grade education. Reading together was a rewarding experience that enriched us all. Moreover, for my son, who has a developmental disability, hearing the stories as he saw the words on the page became a powerful way for him to connect with the story’s meaning, capturing word sounds and forging a deeper connection to the world of storytelling.

- Parent



³ English learners are also sometimes referred to as multilingual learners, or emergent bilinguals.

THE LITERACY CRISIS AND EFFORTS TO ADDRESS IT

To contextualize the current literacy crisis, we share key literacy-related indicators, an overview of the science of reading, the perspectives of parents and teachers regarding the state of literacy in Los Angeles, and what Los Angeles Unified and the state are doing to improve literacy outcomes.

What Publicly Available Data Tell Us

While numbers don't tell the whole story, reading assessment data and other indicators can help paint a picture of the early literacy crisis, barriers to learning to read, and how well students are reading and accessing learning opportunities.

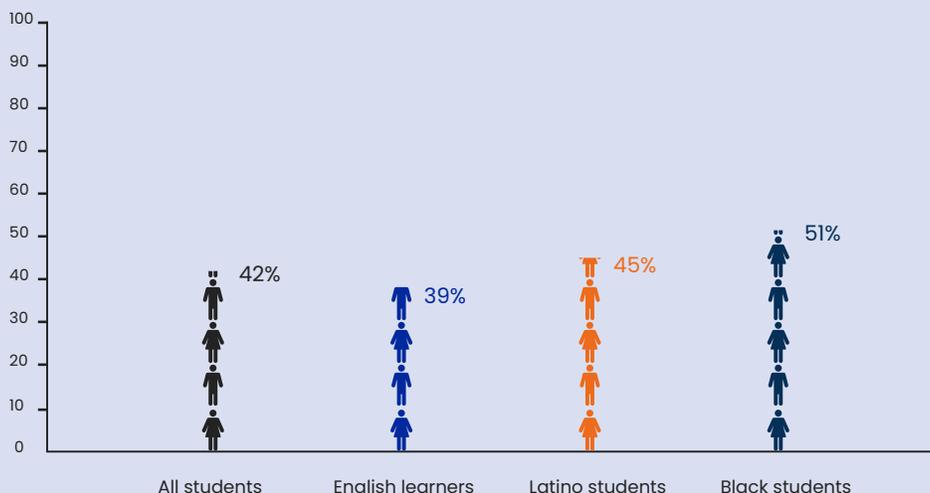
Chronic absence⁴ in the early grades, a key factor impacting children's ability to learn to read, increased dramatically during and after the

COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022-23, too many LAUSD kindergarteners were chronically absent in a grade that lays the foundation for reading.⁵

In third grade, when reading proficiency highly influences future student success, too few LAUSD students were meeting reading standards. At the major milestone of eighth grade, when students are transitioning into high school, the percentage of students meeting reading standards overall and for Latino and Black students was virtually the same as in third grade. And at the final systematic checkpoint in 11th grade, as students are preparing for life after high school, less than half of LAUSD students are meeting reading standards – with some groups at significantly lower levels. These challenges are not unique to LAUSD; reading proficiency across California is also too low.⁶

Too many LAUSD kindergarteners were chronically absent

Kindergarten Chronic Absence, 2022-23



⁴ Chronic absence is commonly defined as missing 10% or more days of the school year for any reason. Students who are chronically absent miss valuable instruction time and are more likely to experience other negative academic and non-academic impacts, such as lower reading scores, dropping out of high school, and higher rates of incarceration (<https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-EarlyWarningConfirmed-2013.pdf>). In one study, just 17% of students who were chronically absent in their kindergarten and first grade years were proficient readers in third grade, compared to 64% of students who were not chronically absent (<https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Attendance-in-the-Early-Grades.pdf>).

⁵ Based on 2022-23 Absenteeism Data, <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/DOCensus/AttChrAbsRate.aspx?agglevel=District&cds=1964733&year=2022-23>.

⁶ All reading data for LAUSD and California are based on 2022-23 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress data, <https://caaspp-elpac.ets.org/caaspp/>.

Very few LAUSD students have strong reading skills – especially at key milestones

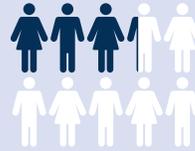
3rd graders meeting reading standards



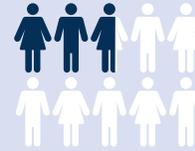
All students
40%



English learners⁷
9%



Latino students
33%



Black students
28%

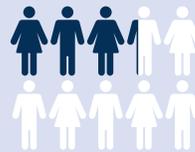
8th graders meeting reading standards



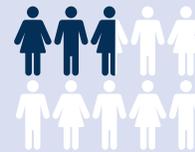
All students
39%



English learners
<1%



Latino students
33%



Black students
28%

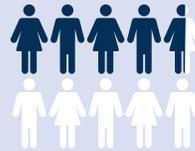
11th graders meeting reading standards



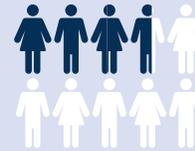
All students
49%



English learners
2%



Latino students
46%



Black students
38%

Reading proficiency across California is also too low



3rd graders
43%



8th graders
46%



11th graders
55%

⁷ Proficiency rates for English learners are typically lower because they have not yet met reclassification criteria, which include demonstrations of basic skills in English. It is expected that English learners will take four to seven years to develop academic English proficiency

THE URGENCY OF EMBRACING THE SCIENCE OF READING

As the data show, too many students across California struggle to read. A key contributing factor is the use of instructional approaches that are not based in evidence. And yet, without a science-informed, coherent, and comprehensive state approach to teaching reading, school and district leaders are left to make critical decisions about reading curriculum and instruction without guidance and support while faced with mixed messages about what works.

Problematic Reading Approaches vs. the Science of Reading

Unfortunately, in many classrooms, students are still receiving reading instruction that is not based on evidence about what works as a result of shifts in leadership and misguided opinions about the best approaches to reading instruction. For example, the “whole language” approach is based on the idea that students learn to read naturally through exposure to literacy-rich environments, the use of context clues, and word memorization. “Balanced literacy” is a variation thereof that embraces elements of multiple approaches, including small doses of phonics instruction while retaining ineffective elements from the whole language approach. Balanced literacy curricula such as Lucy Calkins’ Units of Study have remained popular despite facing increasing pressure to align their programs with evidence-based principles.⁸

The science of reading, sometimes referred to as SOR, is an evidence-based body of research about how students best learn to read. The term “structured literacy” is often used to refer to SOR in practice because it emphasizes the importance of explicitly and systematically teaching all the important components of literacy. The science of reading has existed for decades but has recently gained renewed attention in conversations about what effective literacy instruction is – and is not. While several states have passed comprehensive legislation on SOR, demonstrating remarkable progress in literacy rates over time, California lags behind.



⁸ Columbia University recently dissolved Calkins’ Teacher College Reading and Writing Project amid criticism that her curricula were not sufficiently evidence based. Calkins recently formed a new company that allegedly plans to embrace more scientific approaches to literacy instruction.

The science of reading encapsulates a larger body of thinking around how to help students become proficient readers. The Reading League defines SOR as:

“...a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing. This research has been conducted over the last five decades across the world, and it is derived from thousands of studies conducted in multiple languages. The science of reading has culminated in a preponderance of evidence to inform how proficient reading and writing develop; why some have difficulty; and how we can most effectively assess and teach and, therefore, improve student outcomes through prevention and intervention of reading difficulties.”⁹

Overwhelming evidence about what constitutes effective reading instruction is reflected in the 2000 National Reading Panel Report,¹⁰ which determined there are five essential elements, also referred to as the Five Pillars:

- **Phonics:** matching sounds to letters or letter groups and blending them together
- **Phonemic awareness:** the ability to identify the different sounds that make up speech
- **Fluency:** the ability to read accurately and quickly
- **Vocabulary:** understanding the meaning of individual words
- **Comprehension:** making meaning of text

A follow-up National Literacy Panel report focused on literacy development in second-language learners emphasized oral language

and writing as additional elements of effective literacy instruction, not just for English learners but for all students.¹¹

One common misconception about SOR is that it focuses exclusively on phonics instruction, when in reality, a comprehensive SOR approach is about much more than just basic/foundational skills development. It pushes for foundational skills to be taught explicitly at an early age so children can become fluent readers as soon as possible – the key to success in academic contexts and beyond.



If we teach foundational skills well early, we won't have to have 6th graders reading decodable books.

- Anonymous nonprofit leader



Following SOR principles leaves much room for flexibility to ensure teachers are empowered to meet the unique needs of their students. Indeed, structured literacy is particularly beneficial for supporting diverse learners, including English learners and students with special needs. For example, this approach supports students with or at risk for dyslexia – a learning disability that makes skills like word recognition and spelling difficult – by providing the explicit instruction they need to learn how to read, and supporting early identification of risk of dyslexia to allow for timely intervention and supports.

⁹ <https://www.thereadingleague.org/what-is-the-science-of-reading/defining-guide-ebook/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf>

¹¹ <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315094922>

What Else Do English Learners Need?

Some educators and researchers have raised questions about whether SOR meets the needs of the state's more than 1.1 million multilingual learners (114,000 in LAUSD), who represent one in five K-12 students.¹² These students face the challenge of simultaneously learning English and academic content and should be supported accordingly, in alignment with the principles of the California English Learner Roadmap,¹³ the English Language Development (ELD) standards,¹⁴ and the English Language Arts/English Language Development (ELA/ELD) framework.¹⁵

As California education advocates have increasingly come together to identify common ground about what constitutes a strong reading instructional approach for all students, a fundamental point of agreement is that foundational skills such as phonics are important to effective literacy instruction and should be taught explicitly and systematically – tailored, of course, to students' needs – to allow students to access text. Further, a comprehensive literacy program builds on that foundation by ensuring students have plentiful opportunities to develop oral language, content knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension skills through speaking, listening, reading, and writing – in English, and ideally in other languages as well.



We must have a comprehensive, connected approach to literacy for all students, but especially multilingual learners. Comprehensive means cross-cutting, with a focus on vocabulary, comprehension, oral language development, and translanguaging.¹⁷

– Martha Hernandez, Executive Director, Californians Together



Multilingual learners do not require fundamentally different instruction from other students; rather, they need more oral language practice, vocabulary development, and background knowledge building than most other students, as well as explicit English language development (ELD) and leveraging of home language and cross-language connections. Multilingual learners are just as capable of decoding and spelling as native English speakers, and skills such as comprehension, spelling, and writing in students' first language can support the development of those skills in a second language.¹⁶ Ensuring English learners are supported in these efforts, through effective integrated and designated ELD, can and should align with the SOR approach.



¹² 2022–23 Enrollment by English Language Acquisition Status (ELAS) and Grade, <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/DQCensus/EnrELAS.aspx?cds=00&agglv=State&year=2022-23>.

¹³ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/rmpolicy.asp>

¹⁴ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/documents/eldstndpublication14.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/ri/cf/elaeldfrmwrksbeadopted.asp>

¹⁶ <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315094922>

¹⁷ Translanguaging is the ability of students to use their home language(s) in the classroom, with encouragement from teachers, to help students learn academic English.

Proper Implementation is Essential

Ensuring the success of the science of reading comes down to implementation. Educators must be attentive, for example, to the appropriate balance of foundational and other skills, which shifts as literacy develops. As science of reading principles are implemented in more classrooms, the field must identify and correct potential misinterpretations of SOR, avoiding pitfalls such as over-allocating time to foundational skills at the expense of other critical literacy skills. At its core, effective implementation requires that teachers are supported to become strong instructional leaders, equipped with the skills to assess where their students are at, tailor instruction accordingly, and adjust as needed along the way.



My child struggled with reading comprehension. I thought that schools were experts at knowing how all students learn to read! Unfortunately, it took many years and attempts to figure out which reading programs were helpful to my child. Schools should be experts on how the brain learns to read.

- Parent



WHAT LOS ANGELES PARENTS AND TEACHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT LITERACY

Understanding the perspectives of educational partners who are close to the literacy crisis is critical for gaining an awareness of how illiteracy is impacting families and classrooms in Los Angeles. To round out perspectives on the literacy crisis, Families In Schools engaged parents of Los Angeles Unified students and LAUSD teachers through polling and online journals in partnership with Global Strategy Group.

Parent Perspectives

Parents are often referred to as their child's first and most important teacher. Yet too often, our

educational systems expect parents to support their child's literacy development without the necessary resources. In September 2023, FIS conducted a poll of over 655 LAUSD parents¹⁸ to hear their perspectives on a range of topics, including parent beliefs about reading and their child's literacy skills; the types of reading resources and supports that would be most helpful; understanding of reading instruction and curriculum at their child's school; and reflections on the science of reading. Key poll findings below highlight that schools can do a better job of informing and partnering with parents around literacy instruction.

Perspectives on reading

Despite the high percentage of students not meeting reading standards according to publicly available data,

 **51%**

of parents give their child an "A" when assessing their reading skills.

99%

of parents believe reading skills are "extremely" or "very" important for their child's success in school, and

 **97%**

of parents believe they are "extremely" or "very" important for success in college and in future jobs.



65%

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

¹⁸ 36% of poll respondents were parents of English learner students. The overall margin of error is ±3.8 percentage points and is higher for some subgroups. The data were weighted by race/ethnicity, English learner status, region, gender, age, educational attainment, and enrollment.

Resources and supports LAUSD parents need



78%

of parents overall help their children very or somewhat often with reading, with even higher percentages for some parent groups:



Latino parents
80%



Black parents:
71%



English learner
parents
88%

However, just

51%

of parents strongly agree that they have the tools needed to help their child learn how to read, with some variation across parent groups:



Latino parents
52%



Black parents:
62%



English learner
parents
46%

Parents feel access to books and other reading materials would be one of the most helpful resources for improving their child's reading skills, but only



58%

say they have access to a school library.

Parents of English learners similarly prioritize these resources, in addition to one-on-one and small-group reading supports such as tutoring.



Knowledge of reading curriculum and instructional approaches



WHILE **93%**

of parents are interested in learning more about their child's reading curriculum,

JUST **15%**

of parents are actually aware of the reading curriculum at their child's school, with some slight variation:



Latino parents
11%



Black parents:
14%



English learner parents
15%

JUST **27%**

of parents say information on their school's approach to reading instruction is available.



Opinions about the science of reading

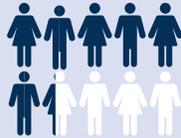
44%



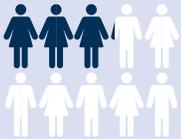
of parents overall have heard “nothing at all” or just “a little” about the term “science of reading,” with significant variation across groups:



Latino parents
40%



Black parents:
62%



English learner parents
31%

95%

of parents say it is extremely or very important to be able to sound out and recognize words in order to read.



96%

of parents support the passage of laws that require schools to incorporate evidence-based reading approaches. The same percentage of English learner parents are in support.



98%

of parents support the passage of laws that require or incentivize schools to provide training and support for teachers to understand and implement the science of reading in their classrooms.



96%

of English learner parents support the passage of laws that require or incentivize schools to provide training and support for teachers to understand and implement the science of reading with English learners.



97%

of parents support the passage of laws that require or incentivize schools to support parents in helping their children learn how to read using evidence-based approaches.

Parents clearly value reading skills and make an effort to help their children with reading. However, they need more information, supports, and resources to do so, and they want schools and the state to do their part to ensure their child can learn how to read.

Teacher Perspectives

The role of teachers cannot be overstated when it comes to improving literacy opportunities and outcomes for students. Yet far too often, teachers do not have access to quality teacher preparation programs or ongoing training, coaching, and other supports once in the classroom. And without teacher knowledge or training in the elements of effective literacy instruction, students will struggle to learn how to read.

To better understand the literacy crisis within the local context, Families In Schools sought out the experiences and views of Los Angeles teachers related to reading by conducting online journals¹⁹ in August 2023 with K-12 teachers in LAUSD. Key findings are as follows.

Challenges LAUSD teachers observe related to lack of reading skills:

Teachers identify many of their students as below grade-level standards in reading, based on low standardized test scores and an inability to teach grade-level content. Learning loss due to COVID school closures and remote learning, especially for English learners, is a major concern among teachers. These challenges result in teachers, particularly content-area teachers in the upper grades, spending more time addressing reading gaps and less time teaching required subject material.

Difficulty reading is identified as a major problem that has a ripple effect on other aspects of schooling and other students in the classroom.

Academic difficulties put a strain on teachers and students. When some students are struggling in class, teachers say it can be hard to maintain a positive and engaging classroom for all. In accommodating the students struggling most with literacy, teachers describe the challenge of lessons becoming derailed and instead needing to focus on foundational elements of reading rather than the concepts being taught. This becomes even more challenging as students get older. Middle school and high school students are embarrassed by their struggles with reading, and teachers describe how students sometimes become disinterested in school and disruptive to the entire class.

It is like the conductor of a train; you can't keep going if one of the cars of the train derails. You have to stop and help and fix that car to get it back on the track so the whole train can keep going. Unfortunately, while you are helping that one car, the other cars are sitting and waiting. But, the conductor feels bad so he goes and works on the other cars that are just sitting there doing nothing. For teachers, it's frustrating because you have standards to introduce and teach but not everyone is ready to receive them at that moment.

– 4th-12th grade teacher

¹⁹ The online journals were conducted over the course of one day, with 37 teachers participating independently on their own time.

What LAUSD teachers need to better support students:

Teachers want more real-time data and resources to provide additional student supports. Teachers feel they have to wait for standardized testing results to come in before they can intervene when students are struggling, and many are concerned they are often just passing students off to the next grade level without addressing the students' weaknesses. Many teachers believe that additional staff, such as aides in the classroom, would be especially helpful to support struggling students and that there is a need for more computers, supplies, reading materials (in the classroom and sent home), and after-school interventions.



Teachers believe that parents should play a key role in early literacy and are looking to their district to support families with challenges outside the classroom that impact learning.

Across the board, teachers believed that parental involvement in early literacy – such as reading at home – is critical. Many teachers believe outside factors like chronic absenteeism, housing, and access to transportation often restrict students from being able to reach their full academic potential. Teachers are looking for their district to provide families with more support and resources outside of the school.

“ Chronic absenteeism definitely affects students' performance and ability to retain information that is being taught. Students that are absent tend to miss a lot of important information and when they return to school, it is difficult for them to catch up. Most of the time they are disengaged in the learning process and are not motivated. Chronic absenteeism makes it difficult for the teacher to outline a specific plan to elevate the student in a reasonable amount of time.

– Pre-K-3rd grade teacher

”

Teachers asked for literacy resources and trainings on how to best support English learner students.

Teachers described outdated or non-existent tools and resources dedicated to helping English learners learn to read. Many described the need to develop “creative solutions” on their own to replace the lackluster or “cookie-cutter” resources they are provided by their school. Some teachers cite a need for additional training around how to best serve English learners.

Many teachers emphasize the importance of phonics but believe there is not just one effective teaching method.

Teachers of young students in particular identified that fundamentals like sounding out words is critical to developing the building blocks necessary for reading proficiency. However, many teachers believe there is no one right way to teach reading – a concerning sentiment given the decades of research showing that science of reading principles outline the most effective approach to reading instruction.

Perspectives on the science of reading:

The majority of teachers were unfamiliar with the term “science of reading,” but most understood it conceptually.

Those who were familiar with the term did not believe it was being used at their school. Once they understood the concept, teachers saw the benefit to students and felt that with proper training, it could be implemented.

“Based on what I know, I think it’s a great idea to expand the implementation of the science of reading. There are many teachers who desire to learn how to teach reading in a better way. I think teachers need an in-person approach to teaching the science of reading which will show them what it looks like in the classroom.”

– 4th-6th grade teacher

Teachers appreciate the goals of the district’s new Literacy and Numeracy Intervention Model but have some concerns about future implementation.

Most teachers think the model is a good idea in theory and are pleased that intervention will extend from elementary through middle school, especially because so many students are reading below grade level. However, some are worried that a subsequent new plan will be established in its place if the current goals are not met in the next few years.

Teachers undoubtedly understand the vital importance of literacy for their students and directly experience the challenges associated with students being behind in reading. Ensuring teachers can provide evidence-based reading instruction will require a stronger understanding of the science of reading and participation in sustained training opportunities to gain the necessary instructional skills.

INCREASED URGENCY TO IMPROVE LITERACY IN LOS ANGELES UNIFIED

In the absence of a comprehensive state literacy strategy and policy, some school districts are undertaking this effort based on their own learnings and initiative. In Los Angeles Unified, district leaders have been carefully implementing SOR-aligned systems and structures to help reverse the literacy crisis in their community. These efforts include supporting curriculum implementation, professional development for all stakeholders, engaging families, and analysis of data to determine how students are responding to instruction and intervention. We spoke with LAUSD leaders to understand the evolution of the district's literacy efforts, what they are currently prioritizing, and ongoing opportunities to bolster the work in the future.

The district's literacy efforts reflect an evolution in policy and practice. While LAUSD has engaged in structured reading approaches to some degree for two decades, it has developed more systematic and comprehensive approaches in recent years. Shortly before the pandemic, district leaders began learning more about the science of reading through resources like Scarborough's Rope.²⁰ They began piloting Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA curriculum, a comprehensive approach that includes explicit instruction in foundational skills) with schools on an opt-in basis and continued adding more sites each year. The district also began implementing the evidence-based LETRS training (which many teachers have now completed). Primary Promise was introduced in 2020 to provide K-2 intervention teachers at targeted schools in an effort to address pandemic learning loss through

one-time Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds.

Increasing Coherency in Literacy Approaches

Today, the district is taking an increasingly systematic and coherent approach to literacy. District leaders describe a multi-tiered approach that ensures a common foundation for students grounded in the science of reading and identifies necessary interventions for struggling students. Over half of all elementary schools are now using the CKLA curriculum, with plans for all elementary schools to do so starting in 2024-25. Intervention efforts are guided by the new Literacy and Numeracy Intervention Model, which expands intervention efforts to more schools (including middle schools) and provides more professional development (PD) for intervention teachers, classroom teachers, aides, and administrators. The model aims to build the capacity of classroom educators to provide targeted student supports using evidence-based practices, with the goal of ensuring all students are fluent readers by the end of third grade.

Reading proficiently by third grade requires intentionality, starting in the early years, which is why district staff are increasingly focusing on key literary elements in preschool and transitional kindergarten (TK) programming such as phonological awareness, read-alouds to model fluent reading, and oral dictation to help students understand connections between language and written words.

²⁰ Scarborough's Rope was created by literacy expert Hollis Scarborough, who visualized the interconnectedness and necessity of text decoding and comprehension to achieve reading fluency.

District leaders are also mindful of the needs of multilingual learners in their comprehensive literacy approach by ensuring ELs can access the core foundation with additional EL support strategies. Leaders describe the importance of Integrated ELD to ensure ELs are accessing grade-level content and maximizing academic discourse across subject areas to make meaning. According to district leaders, every teacher will receive a copy of the newly developed UTK-12 Maximizing Academic Language Exchanges trifold to support this effort and intentionally increase opportunities for students to interact.

Training and Support for Educators and Administrators

District leaders understand that LAUSD's new literacy approach requires professional development. To that end, they are providing PD for every literacy teacher in the district in the 2023-24 school year to help them understand the science of reading components as well as training for administrators so they know what to look for as they conduct classroom observations. Early education teachers are also receiving PD in the 2023-24 school year to build their capacity, particularly for TK teachers, given that TK is relatively new and to ensure consistency across the early education spectrum. And, the district is supporting school administrators by providing ongoing PD for them, creating a classroom observation tool to ensure SOR is being implemented, and providing a menu of PD options to offer teachers who need additional support.

Through Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles, instructional teams and administrators will use assessment data and classroom observations to assess their efforts and make instructional

changes as needed. Understanding assessment data plays an important role in this process because it allows educators and leaders to make more tailored instructional decisions. The district has been using DIBELS as a K-2 screener for over 15 years through its work with Amplify; it also began using iReady in the 2023-24 school year to help understand students' reading comprehension levels across the grades via a diagnostic, interim/mid-year, and end-of-year assessment. Both DIBELS and iReady help group students and recommend appropriate lessons by reading level.



The problem we're trying to solve for is implementation. Some teachers are at mastery level, and some are at the beginning level. We're not going to rest until we continuously reflect and grow and nudge so our teachers are going up to the exemplary master level and reimagine how we build principal capacity to become stronger instructional leaders.

-Michael Romero, Chief of Transitional Programs, LAUSD



Embedding Literacy into Family Engagement

Los Angeles Unified is also working on embedding literacy into its family engagement efforts through stronger collaboration between the Office of Student, Family and Community Engagement (SFACE) and content expert teams. SFACE has developed a series of webinar modules on literacy, including SOR, for school site instructional leads to share with parents, in addition to a course series for parents within the district’s adult program that includes the topic of foundational early literacy.



As we transcend from the pandemic to accelerate learning, it’s central for families to be deeply knitted into our strategy. We want ongoing parent engagement so parents learn about the science of reading.

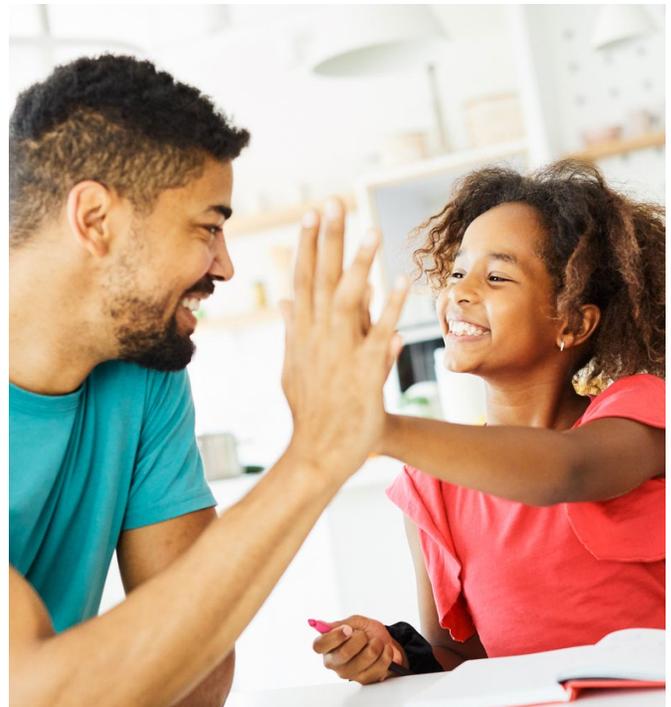
–Antonio Plascencia, Engagement Officer, Office of Student, Family and Community Engagement, LAUSD



A Greater, Longer Term Commitment is Needed

The district’s efforts are helping move early literacy outcomes in the right direction, as evidenced by slight increases in recent third grade assessment scores compared to prior years. However, there is more work to do to ensure LAUSD’s efforts result in all students becoming literate. Looking ahead, district leaders are focused on scaling resources to support instruction. Training, coaching, and other supports for teachers and administrators must be sustained year over year, scaled up such that all educators receive ongoing support, and differentiated based on educator

needs – starting with ensuring all educators actually understand the science of reading. All principals must be equipped with the skills – and be expected to – prioritize classroom observations, identify gaps in instruction, and identify follow-up supports educators need to effectively implement SOR. Further, the district should take a multi-dimensional approach to family engagement that truly views parents as equal partners and creates multiple avenues for families to learn about SOR and how they can support reading outside of the classroom. Families should also receive accurate information on their child’s progress on a regular basis. All these efforts and continued investments should be differentiated based on school needs, prioritizing those schools with the lowest literacy outcomes.



District leaders aim to be mindful of what makes sense to centralize at the district level versus where to give schools autonomy in order to ensure a systematic approach to teaching literacy while empowering teachers and school leaders to make decisions based on what students need. Doing so will require that the district stays committed to the current plan and vision without losing momentum or focus. To that end, the district's literacy efforts should be guided by a written, public, long-term plan, frequent Board of Education reports/discussion, and regular progress reporting to the community that makes it clear literacy continues to be a top district priority.



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We need to stay committed to the strategic plan, literacy goals, and vision of the future when every student will apply the most important aspects of literacy – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – to reach their fullest potential. We need commitment from the state for ongoing funding for parent engagement, intervention, and enrichment to reach this vision.

- Frances Baez, Chief Academic Officer, LAUSD

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There must be a balance between the art and science of literacy instruction. Data can only take us so far. Then there's the art piece: Teaching people how to use instructional tools and data and building their capacity to make decisions. The aim is not compliance, the aim is coherence to ensure all students districtwide attain their greatest potential. Every school, every classroom, every day.

- Karla Estrada, Deputy Superintendent of Instruction, LAUSD

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WHY THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA MUST DO MORE

An increasing number of states across the country have passed comprehensive legislation to ensure early literacy instruction is aligned to the science of reading, resulting in dramatic improvement in student reading outcomes. In contrast, California’s state literacy efforts have not been comprehensive and have mostly been framed as guidance, with leaders shying away from required approaches in the name of local control. Still, state leaders have started responding to increased pressure to engage around the topic of literacy in recent years through the following efforts:

- **A California Literacy Roadmap** was funded via \$1 million in the 2023-24 budget to serve as a voluntary instructional guide for improving literacy outcomes. It is unclear what the Roadmap will look like or how it is being developed.
- **Universal screening for reading difficulties** was passed in the Governor’s 2023-24 trailer bill, after repeated efforts in recent years, mandating that all K-2 students are screened for potential reading difficulties, including risk of dyslexia. Early identification of risk of dyslexia and other reading difficulties is important because it allows for early intervention to ensure students are adequately supported in learning to read.
- **Funding for reading specialists and literacy coaches** in high-need schools was included in the Governor’s 2022-23 and 2023-24 budgets. These funds will help schools hire and train literacy coaches, though they are not required to implement evidence-based methods.

- **Teacher preparation programs are required to implement new, evidence-based literacy standards**, thanks to SB 488 (2021).
- **California received a federal Comprehensive Literacy State Development grant** in 2019 to align and integrate various state literacy initiatives and guidance documents, as outlined in the California Comprehensive State Literacy Plan.²¹ The California Department of Education distributed funds to seven lead county offices of education (COE), though it is unclear to what extent the original grant plans have been realized.



²¹ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr21/yr21rel75.asp>

- **The English Language Arts/English Language Development (ELA/ELD) framework was adopted** in 2014 to help guide curriculum and instruction. While the framework contains useful elements and makes it clear that explicit teaching of foundational skills is critical, it is over 1,000 pages long, making it inaccessible and impractical to many educators who are a primary audience for this document. Further, while the adoption of new frameworks creates an opportunity for publishers to create new, aligned curriculum and instructional materials, CDE's adoption process does not always follow the recommendations of organizations like EdReports, which review districts' instructional materials.

While they represent a move in the right direction, these piecemeal efforts simply do not go far enough. Leaders across the more than 900 school districts in California are looking to the state to provide clear expectations and accompanying implementation supports, rather than being left to make these critical policy decisions on their own without the proper funding and assistance.



THE PATH FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

We can and must solve the literacy crisis. With clear evidence pointing to what works for children to learn how to read, now is the time to accelerate action. The devastating impact of the pandemic only exacerbated persistent equity gaps and increased the urgency with which we must address this crisis. Educational partners at multiple levels – including district and school leaders, regional leaders, state leaders, parents and families, and other community partners – must translate knowledge to practice and policy to bring about change. Here, we offer a series of recommendations that will ensure Los Angeles and the state as a whole make significant strides toward ensuring all third graders are reading on grade level. Given the need for a comprehensive set of solutions to address the complex challenges we have outlined in this report, we include a more detailed list of recommendations by educational partner group in separate documents available for download.



The pandemic had really devastating impacts on our youngest learners. I don't think we'll see the impact of this immediately... A lot of our kids were on iPads/tech, and early literacy requires so much more.

- Karla Pleitéz-Howell, Executive Director,
First 5 LA



LOS ANGELES UNIFIED

There are many factors that influence the development of reading skills in school, and local educational leaders have significant influence over these factors through the decisions they make and the district and school culture they create. Los Angeles Unified is making great strides in this area, but even more is needed to scale and sustain these efforts into the future. District and school leaders should:

1 Communicate more publicly the district's commitment to literacy as a key priority:

- Continue to elevate literacy as one of the district's top priorities, and develop a public implementation plan that aligns with other planning documents, policies, and guidance such as the English Learner Roadmap policy, ELA/ELD framework, and California Dyslexia Guidelines.
- Create a publicly available annual scorecard at every school that articulates where schools are in their SOR implementation journey.

2 Scale and sustain training and supports for all teachers and administrators around science of reading implementation:

- Make SOR professional development (PD) sessions mandatory for all early education through high school teachers, with a more time-intensive focus for early elementary teachers, and include paraeducators, special education, and intervention teachers in these sessions.

- Differentiate training expectations and opportunities to ensure teachers and support staff acquire the appropriate skills and knowledge to implement SOR through their respective roles. Ensure SOR training for special education teachers in particular emphasizes how to support students with reading disabilities and dyslexia.
- Ensure all principals receive the same training and expectations to ensure regular classroom observations and identification of instructional gaps to be addressed.
- Build PD partnerships with regional child care networks to bring SOR-aligned early literacy PD to more early education providers, including those outside of school districts.



Building teacher knowledge is so important so they can make decisions based on where their students are at...You may have one second grade classroom where you only need 10 minutes of phonemic awareness recap but 20 minutes on syllable types, because they already have the other pieces down. Diagnostic assessments help to know where kids are at [with reading].

—Leslie Zoroya, LACOE Reading/Language Arts Project Director



3

Adopt only evidence-based curricula and instructional materials across the district:

- Move to one core SOR-aligned reading curriculum as quickly as possible, and ensure all resources and materials are aligned with the science of reading.
- When seeking out new curricula, ensure all adoption committee members understand the value of evidence-based curriculum. Continue utilizing resources such as EdReports²² and the Reading League²³ to identify SOR-aligned curricula.

4

Carefully design instructional plans and strategically allocate resources:

- Create strong reading instruction models that ensure instructional time is strategically maximized and SOR expectations and implementation are consistent. Maintain vigilance in implementation to identify and correct potential misinterpretations of SOR.
- Develop and execute a clear plan for literacy intervention that identifies staffing structures, time allocation, student groupings, and targeted intervention strategies to catch students up.
- Continue the current strategy that invests resources at the school site level based on need/lowest outcomes.

5

Deepen efforts to monitor student progress and address barriers to learning:

- Build on the PDSA structure by including families in data conversations and creating data rooms that facilitate active engagement with the data.
- Ensure that tools such as Ed the chatbot and the Individual Acceleration Plan facilitate real-time data use to address barriers to learning.
- Ensure systems are in place to intervene when specific disabilities, such as risk of dyslexia, are suspected. Anticipate the implementation of the 2025-26 mandatory screening for risk of dyslexia through teacher training and support in the near term.
- Double down on addressing chronic absenteeism, with a renewed focus on student engagement to ensure a sense of belonging and deeper family engagement strategies.



The data is ‘the what’: Are we identifying, student by student, exactly where their skills are, as it relates to the science of reading? The ‘so what’ is, can we take that information and interpret it (i.e. through data conversations among classroom teachers in team meetings, talking about what the data is telling us). Then there’s the ‘now what’: Do we have the right protocols in place to deliver explicit, systematic direct instruction to students to give them what they need? This model is proven to deliver results.

- Jim Mylen, Emerson Collective



²² <https://www.edreports.org/>

²³ <https://www.thereadingleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/The-Reading-League-Curriculum-Evaluation-Guidelines-2022.pdf>

6

Equip families to play an active role in supporting their students' literacy journey:

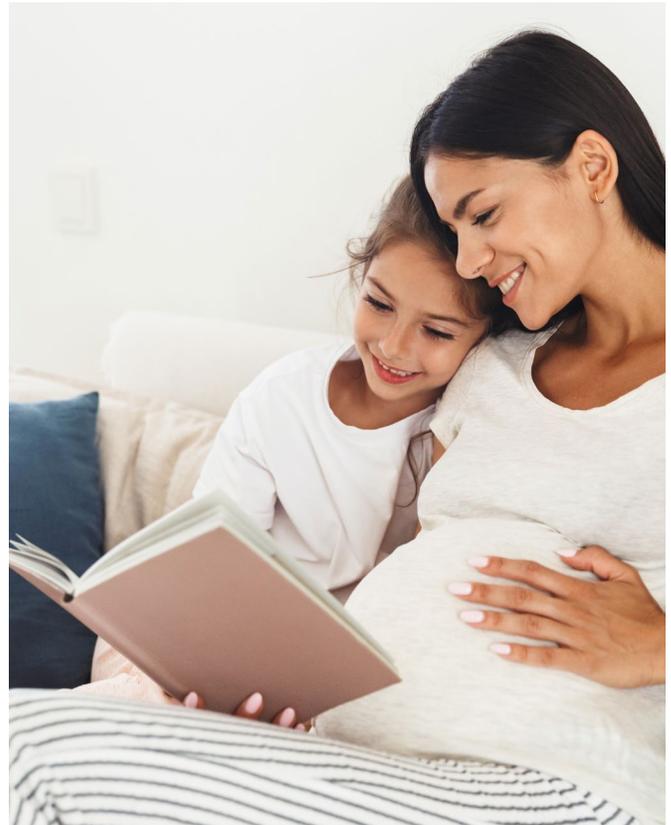
- Working with community groups, share information with parents and families about the district's reading curriculum and programmatic efforts in a digestible and easy-to-follow format that is translated across the languages spoken by families.
- Reach families starting at birth through partnerships with birthing hospitals and other entities that work with families who have children ages 0-3 to begin promoting foundational literacy skills.
- Create more opportunities to develop parent-teacher connections to help parents understand what their child is learning, how they are progressing, and how parents and families can support that learning at home.



7

Make long-term commitments to science of reading implementation efforts:

- Avoid the trap of taking on new initiatives and phasing out existing ones too quickly. Commit to evidence-based efforts and provide the supports needed to implement them effectively.
- Monitor changes in teacher practice and instructional delivery as well as student literacy outcomes to ensure the district's SOR efforts and investments are having the intended impact, and adjust as needed if they are not.



STATE LEADERS

State leaders must take on a more significant role when it comes to addressing the literacy crisis. The state must elevate early literacy as a top priority and ensure that every student in California has access to the best, evidence-based literacy instruction possible, and that the value of local control does not become an obstacle to outlining the comprehensive approach and supports school districts need and deserve. State leaders should:

1 **Create a cohesive voice that unequivocally supports the science of reading:**

- State leaders at all levels should clearly express their support for SOR, actively engage in conversations to raise awareness of the literacy crisis, ensure strong coordination across departments, and commit to harnessing the state’s available resources.
- Legislators should aim to become aware of the science of reading to ensure that literacy policies are guided by evidence.
- Current efforts in development must propose bold, comprehensive, SOR-aligned approaches to ensuring all students are literate by third grade.

2

Provide clear direction to, and targeted resources for, school districts to implement evidence-based literacy practices:

- Legislators should pass, and the Governor should sign into law, comprehensive early literacy legislation that outlines a multi-year plan to accomplish the following objectives:
 - » Require school districts to adopt SOR-aligned curriculum and instructional materials from an approved state list.
 - » Require teachers, coaches, and administrators to complete sustained SOR training, either within their local school district or through a state-approved list of providers, ensuring the content clearly reflects the needs of multilingual learners.
 - » Require the Commission on Teacher Credentialing to update and strengthen literacy standards and credential/authorization requirements for reading and literacy specialists to ensure they adhere to the science of reading.
 - » Support parent and community engagement in the literacy realm, similar to legislation in Tennessee,²⁴ and in Alaska and Colorado.²⁵
 - » Pledge sustained funding for these ongoing efforts.

²⁴ See components of legislation in Tennessee: https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/learning-acceleration/AC_EL_TNCommitmentToEarlyLiteracy.pdf.

²⁵ See components of legislation in Alaska and Colorado: <https://www.shankerinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/ReadingReform%20ShankerInstitute%20FullReport%20072723.pdf>.



We need more multi-year state and federal funding to address pandemic fallout and the challenges [that existed] even before that. We need this funding to plan and roll things out systematically in school districts, especially when we have new teachers and need to build their capacity. It requires significant time and financial investments to accelerate learning, and we have to make some tough decisions, especially with ESSER dollars going away.

-Karla Estrada, Deputy Superintendent of Instruction, LAUSD



3

Review and update existing policies as needed, and monitor implementation of new efforts, to ensure alignment with the science of reading:

- Require literacy coaches and reading specialists to be well trained in SOR and to align their services to SOR principles, including those working through the State System of Support.
- Evaluate implementation of cornerstone policies and guidance intended to better serve multilingual students, including the ELA/ELD Framework and the English Learner Roadmap policy, to understand existing implementation efforts and their impact on literacy outcomes.

4

Increase transparency and public reporting around literacy programs and outcomes:

- Require school districts to develop and annually update local reading plans. Include a plan for reading improvement that is broadly communicated to parents/ community members.
- Gather district-level K-2 literacy screening results and include them on the California Dashboard; require school districts to publish the data on their websites and in local reading plans.
- Gather information on which reading curricula districts are using, and share those findings via a public database.



LOCAL LEADERS

City and regional leaders also have a role to play in elevating the literacy crisis and contributing to solutions to address it. They can support early literacy efforts by expanding and maintaining effective partnerships with school districts and nonprofit partners, and utilizing strategic and creative approaches to elevate the importance of literacy.

1 Identify new and continue existing city-nonprofit-school district partnerships:

- Enlist city agencies and neighborhood councils to double or triple the number of Little Free Libraries in neighborhoods throughout the city.
- Engage and fund community partners to make available information and resources to families about early literacy and how to support their children at home, starting at birth.
- Help reduce chronic absenteeism by ensuring safe passages to and from school.

2 Utilize strategic communication approaches to engage parents and other community members around supporting literacy:

- Communicate the importance of regular school attendance and early literacy to families in linguistically and culturally sensitive ways and use accessible language.

- Engage with unconventional community partners, such as community health clinics, to help convey critical messages about literacy.
- Hire people deeply embedded in communities to help engage families in learning about the importance of literacy using the successful Promotora (community health worker) model.



It's important to meet parents where they are, literally. We are huge proponents of having counselors come to our community services rather than parents having to go to the school campus.

-Abigail Marquez, General Manager, Community Investment for Families Department, City of Los Angeles



COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Nonprofit and other partners play an important role in the education ecosystem, whether by contributing direct service supports or by bringing to light information about and solutions to the current crisis. Depending on their specific role in the literacy landscape, these partners should:

1 Establish (and continue) direct service partnerships with schools and districts:

- Match service offerings (tutoring, community school supports, and summer and after-school programming) to identified needs, ensuring that literacy-related supports are SOR-aligned.
- Identify new/additional funding sources to support sustained relationships with priority schools.
- Promote the importance of regular school attendance, especially in the early years when children are developing foundational literacy skills.



2

Collaborate with schools/districts and other organizations to raise literacy awareness:

- Work with schools and districts to co-host literacy events and learning opportunities focused on the importance of reading by third grade, SOR, and understanding gaps between report card grades and reading mastery based on assessments.
- Help elevate the importance of literacy by sharing information about the current crisis, organizing and mobilizing communities to create policy and practice changes, and identifying implementation bright spots to share with the field.



PARENTS AND FAMILIES

To support the development of early literacy skills with their children at home and advocate for the needs of their children at school, parents and families should:

1 Help their children develop strong literacy habits:

- Engage in nurturing talk and interaction to help build their baby's brain. Beginning at birth, read aloud to model fluent reading. Provide children with as many books as possible to allow them to independently explore literature. Engage in these activities in their native language.
- Visit the local library frequently to access free books in multiple languages, technology resources, and activities for kids such as live storytime.
- Make limited screen time more literacy oriented by utilizing free or low-cost quality educational technology resources, and talk with children about what they are hearing and seeing to support the development of oral language and comprehension skills.



My daily schedule is incredibly hectic, so having the opportunity to share moments reading with my son every day creates precious memories for me, especially in the kitchen. I love to cook, and he loves to eat while reading the recipes! Regardless of the day's challenges, I can always count on these special moments we share as a mother and son.

– Parent



2

Engage with their child's school to understand literacy progress and advocate for supports as needed:

- Learn about the science of reading and curriculum that is aligned to the science of reading. Ask teachers what reading curriculum they are using and what professional development they have received. Advocate for your child if curriculum and instruction is not aligned to the science of reading.
- Ask teachers, every year and in every grade, how reading skills are developing at school and whether children are on track. Request support in understanding assessment data and ask about any discrepancies between test results and other progress indicators, such as report cards.
- Ask what help students are receiving if they find out their child is behind based on reading and writing assessments, and demand supports such as tutoring and summer programs.
- Establish a daily routine of daily attendance. Missing too much school can impact children's learning in kindergarten and beyond.



CONCLUSION

The facts are undeniable: Los Angeles, and the state of California, are in the midst of a literacy crisis that has persisted for far too long. Though the effects are widespread, our most marginalized students are the most deeply impacted by this crisis, making illiteracy one of the most urgent equity issues of our time. Indeed, ensuring all our students can read is a core civil right that we must all work to uphold.

Fortunately, we know from decades of research and experience that the science of reading offers one of the most important solutions to help reverse these trends and set students up for reading success. To be sure, embracing the science of reading is just the start; ensuring better literacy outcomes for students requires clear policies and strong implementation on the ground, through supportive resources and the collaborative efforts of educators, families, and leaders at all levels starting from birth. The findings and recommendations in this report should serve as the start of a literacy movement that helps community members and leaders see literacy as a human right and the key to our individual and collective success.



We are grateful to our philanthropic partners for their generous support of this project



