

# Understanding Policies and Issues



## Policy Position: Literacy and Science of Reading

March 2025

### Overview

Reading is a fundamental skill that is hard to acquire and master for children with learning disabilities such as dyslexia and other disabilities that impact word-reading and decoding (e.g. developmental language disorder). Early recognition of learning challenges combined with timely, effective evidence-aligned services are critical to support student success. Research<sup>1</sup> has shown that individuals with learning disabilities experience substantial negative impacts on their mental health, overall learning, and long-term employment. Furthermore, evidence illuminates the impacts of overall illiteracy on other educational and social aspects such as dropout rates<sup>2</sup>, crime<sup>3</sup>, and other obstacles to well-being.

The “reading wars” date back to the 20th century: a debate between two primary methods (phonics and whole language) of teaching children to read. Recent years have been marked by literacy reform based on the science of reading. The [science of reading](#) is a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing. It is not a specific, one size-fits-all program. It is not just phonics. It is evidence that informs development of reading and writing difficulties and how educators can most effectively assess and teach.

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<sup>1</sup>Aro, T., Eklund, K., Eloranta, A.-K., Närhi, V., Korhonen, E., & Ahonen, T. (2019). Associations Between Childhood Learning Disabilities And Adult-Age Mental Health Problems, Lack Of Education, And Unemployment. *Journal Of Learning Disabilities*, 52(1), 71–83.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022219418775118>

<sup>2</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2011). *Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation*. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED518818>

<sup>3</sup> Greenberg, E., Dunleavy, E., Kutner, M. A., National Center For Education Statistics., & National Center For Education Statistics. (2007). *Literacy Behind Bars Results From The 2003 National Assessment Of Adult Literacy Prison Survey*. National Center For Education Statistics, Institute Of Education Sciences, U.S. Dept. Of Education.

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As of November 2024, forty states have passed laws and policies mandating schools to use evidence-aligned methods rooted in the science of reading for reading instruction<sup>4</sup>. These laws also interact with state-level laws and policies specifically about dyslexia or other reading disabilities, which often focus on early screening or teacher preparation requirements. These laws are steps in the right direction and achieve certain ‘objectives’, such as teacher training and curriculum, that are not dictated by federal policy. However, the implementation of initiatives sometimes falls short of intentions.

## What We Know

- On the Nation’s Report Card (NAEP), 96% of students with a specific learning disability (SLD) are not performing at proficient level or higher on the reading assessment.<sup>5</sup>
  - In Grade 4, 79% are at basic and 17% are below basic
  - In Grade 8, 71% are at basic and 25% are below basic
- Black and Hispanic students with SLD have even greater score gaps than their White counterparts on NAEP, suggesting opportunity gaps throughout their education.<sup>6</sup>
- Students with disabilities performed over three years below their peers without disabilities on reading achievement assessments.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Just Right Reader. (2024, January 22). *Which states have science of reading laws in 2024?* Just Right Reader

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2024). National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2024 Reading\* Assessment. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.

\*Reading data obtained directly from the U.S. Department of Education and is not available on the Nation’s Report Card website.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Gilmour, A. F., Fuchs, D., & Wehby, J. H. (2019). Are students with disabilities accessing the curriculum? A meta-analysis of the reading achievement gap between students with and without disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 85(3), 329-346.

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- Between 2013 and 2023, 37 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws or implemented new policies related to evidence-aligned reading instruction since 2013.<sup>8</sup>

## NCLD Believes

- 1. Literacy must be a national focus in every grade to give students opportunities to succeed and to develop a strong and career-ready workforce.**

In the late 1990s, Congress convened the National Reading Panel that resulted in a 2000 report *Teaching Children to Read*. In the early 2000s, *Get Ready to Read!*, a program of NCLD's, was a national campaign on early literacy including screening. The term "right to read" has been used by advocates like NAACP activist Kareem Weaver in the 2023 documentary of the same name.

- 2. Educators must be equipped to provide high-quality and effective literacy instruction. Teacher preparation, licensure standards, and in-service professional development are essential.**

Schools of education and professional learning providers must align coursework with the science of reading and eliminate non-aligned information from their offerings. Licensure requirements should ensure that teachers are competent in providing evidence-aligned reading instruction.

- 3. Tier I/Core instruction is key to successful literacy initiatives, including in secondary education.**

In Multi-Tiered Systems of Support models, all students receive Tier I instruction. Instructional coherence matters for students with learning disabilities. There needs to be clear alignment between core instruction and any interventions or supplemental instruction provided. The Grade 8 NAEP

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<sup>8</sup> Wiley, S. (2024, January 22). *The science of reading in 2024: 5 state initiatives to watch*. Education Week.

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scores indicate that many adolescents struggle with reading and schoolwide approaches to literacy are one of the most critical aspects of supporting older students. This requires cross-collaboration from staff across the school, including special education teachers, general education teachers, and interventionists.

#### **4. Monitoring student progress with high-quality formative and summative assessments is critical.**

A 2023 NCLD survey found that 73% of caregivers “agree” or “somewhat agree” that summative assessments provide important information to compare their child’s performance in school on grade-level standards. [Interim, formative, and diagnostic assessments](#) are key parts of a comprehensive assessment system and can guide instruction.

#### **5. Retention should be a last resort for any student who is struggling with reading.**

Many states have policies that require or allow retention for students not reading proficiently after third grade. Retention should only occur after the student has received intensive interventions from Pre-K through third grade. If a student is retained, instruction should include personalized, intensive, evidence-aligned strategies that are targeted to the area of need. The strategies should also be reviewed often to determine whether the student is ready to move on.

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## Policy Recommendations

### Federal

The Federal role is to support state and local efforts in adopting policies and laws that promote effective literacy practices. This has included funding high quality research as well as issuing studies and reports (i.e. the National Reading Panel).

- **Provide federal funding for programs focused on literacy for students from birth through grade 12, including students with disabilities.**

These programs include:

- Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title II authorizes the “Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation” (LEARN)<sup>9</sup> comprehensive literacy program. LEARN provides competitive grants to states to help local school districts develop comprehensive, evidence-aligned literacy instruction and intervention plans for children and youth, birth through grade 12, struggling to reach literacy proficiency.
- ESEA Title II authorizes Innovative Approaches to Literacy (IAL) grant program<sup>10</sup>, which targets underserved school libraries and nonprofit organizations. IAL grants target high-need communities by providing literacy support for schools that develop and enhance innovative and effective school library programs, provide early literacy services, and provide high-quality and reading level-appropriate books for children.
- ESEA Title II also authorizes a comprehensive center<sup>11</sup> focused on students at risk of not attaining full literacy skills due to a disability (currently [National Center on Improving Literacy](#)).

<sup>9</sup> Title II Part B, Subpart 2 Section 2221-2225 of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

<sup>10</sup> Title II Part B, Subpart 2 Section 2226 of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

<sup>11</sup> Title II Part B, Subpart 4 Section 2244 of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

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- **Invest in innovative educator preparation and provide resources for strengthening the implementation of the science of reading policies and initiatives.**

For example, Congress could establish a grant program that incentivizes states to set requirements for teacher candidate licensure, certification, or teaching standards that will prepare all educators, regardless of grade or content area, to provide evidence-aligned literacy instruction to students. Congress could also fund [Teach to Reach grants](#), an authorized but unfunded HEA program, which would provide grant funding to IHEs to prepare general education teachers to support students with disabilities.

- **Improve research to practice gaps.**

The federal government should lead the way towards evidence-aligned practice and policymaking. For example, the What Works Clearinghouse, funded by the Institute for Education Sciences, seeks to improve access to quality research for practitioners for prospective and in-service educators and could be improved in a reauthorization of the Education Sciences Reform Act. Throughout federally funded research efforts, a focus on reading and literacy, including adult literacy, is critical.

## State

The majority of states have legislation focusing on one or more of the following: banning the three cueing approach to reading (too narrow), requiring universal screening of reading difficulties, requiring instructional materials aligned with the science of reading, and requiring educator professional development. Legislation should be comprehensive and thus we offer the following recommendations for state policymakers:

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- **Incentivize curricular adoption and implementation support through vetting and funding.**

When states mandate a particular curriculum, it can limit the funds districts can use to purchase high quality instructional materials (HQIM). Further, not all HQIM are equal. Funding enables investment in high quality instructional materials and science of reading based teacher professional development. State Education Agencies can support the vetting of materials to improve quality and implementation.

- **Focus on educator quality and support, including preparation on how to teach diverse learners in reading.**

Updating teacher preparation coursework and state licensure requirements, as well as ensuring clinical experiential opportunities for pre-service teachers, can help ensure teachers have the relevant content and pedagogical knowledge.

- **Requiring early screening of reading difficulties with state funding.**

States should provide resources for districts and schools to select high-quality universal screeners that can identify students as being at risk for future reading difficulties and possible reading disabilities. Training and support to administrators and teachers on the employment and interpretation of screening results, including using data to inform interventions, is critical.

- **Ensure stakeholders are involved in both passing and implementing literacy policies.**

Students, families, educators, administrators, academic institutions, and even business leaders should all have a seat at the table. Stakeholder support and engagement are key for rolling out and implementing new literacy initiatives.

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- **Invest in implementation and sustainability of these policies.**

For example, highly structured and comprehensive coaching models can support the roll-out and sustainability of literacy initiatives.

## **Additional Resources**

- [Reading Snapshot](#)
- [National Center on Improving Literacy](#)