



Professional Learning for Administrators: Early Literacy

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Since 2020, educators in the United States have left or intend to leave their positions at higher rates than ever before.^{1,2} The result, when paired with a dwindling recruitment pipeline,³ is a significant shortage of highly qualified educators across the country.

The Center on Strengthening and Supporting the Educator Workforce (SSEW) addresses this shortage by increasing the uptake and scaling of evidence-based practices. This series of briefs explores high-leverage solutions to improve the recruitment, preparation, and retention of American educators.

The Need

Over 45 states have now adopted early literacy policies, reflecting a growing recognition that early reading proficiency is foundational to students' long-term academic success and life outcomes. Students who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are significantly more likely to experience ongoing academic difficulties and remain behind their peers over time without effective intervention.⁴ Reading proficiency by this point is also associated with later educational attainment, high school graduation, employment outcomes, and earning potential.⁵⁻⁷ As a result, states are driving the implementation of evidence-based K–3 reading programs aligned to the science of reading (SoR) as a critical lever for improving student outcomes.

While most state policies require the adoption of evidence-based K–3 curricula, universal screening, intervention systems, and teacher professional development, only some states require SoR professional development for administrators. This gap is significant, as school leaders play an important role in ensuring that literacy initiatives are implemented effectively and sustained over time. Even when professional learning is required, school leaders must balance competing responsibilities that span management, policy, and instruction, often limiting their ability to fully engage with instructional reforms.

Historically, the education leadership field has shifted principals from management roles to become instructional leaders. However, this transition has not always been accompanied by sufficient preparation or professional learning, leaving many school leaders without the tools needed to effectively support evidence-based curriculum, teaching, and learning, particularly in early literacy. As a result, the implementation of SoR presents a modern challenge that requires principals to move beyond procedural support to develop sufficient content knowledge in SoR to lead coherent, system-level change.⁸ Effective reform requires strong leadership, aligned systems, and ongoing monitoring.^{9,10} Therefore, principals must understand literacy practices well enough to recognize high-quality instruction, provide meaningful feedback, and make informed decisions about how to support teachers in sustaining effective practices. Closing this gap requires intentional, targeted professional learning that builds administrators' knowledge of SoR and equips them to lead implementation across their schools.

Evidence-Based Solutions

Principal leadership has a direct effect on student achievement.¹¹ In literacy, principals act as a catalyst for improvement by influencing reading outcomes indirectly through the refinement of teacher practice. This influence occurs through high-quality instructional feedback, coherent and sustained professional learning, and the intentional creation of optimal conditions for instructional improvement. These conditions include aligned schoolwide systems, a collaborative professional culture, protected time for instructional learning, consistent use of student data, and clear expectations for evidence-based literacy instruction. To maximize this impact, evidence-based solutions must prioritize building the literacy knowledge of principals, specifically their understanding of the core components of reading (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension); their ability to identify evidence-based instructional practices aligned to the science of reading; and their capacity to use data to monitor student progress and guide instructional decisions. By strengthening their instructional routines and ensuring coherence across school systems, principals move beyond managerial roles to become literacy-informed instructional leaders.¹²

Building Principals' Literacy Content Knowledge

Many principals supervise preK–3 classrooms without formal early childhood credentials or specialized preparation in early learning. National research indicates that this gap is widespread: only a small number of states require early childhood coursework in principal preparation programs, and early learning content is generally “extremely limited” in licensure requirements.^{13,14} In practice, this results in principals overseeing early childhood classrooms without adequate training. One national survey found that only about 20 percent of principals supervising preK felt well prepared in early childhood education,¹⁵



and more recent research confirms that few principals hold early childhood certification despite being responsible for these grades.¹⁶ This gap in knowledge of child development and early literacy pedagogy can hinder a principal's ability to lead early literacy initiatives and identify appropriate literacy practices. To effectively support high-quality teaching, principals must understand what effective instruction looks and sounds like in an early elementary setting, including developmentally appropriate practices and the progression of early literacy skills.

Effective leadership in SoR-aligned instruction does not require that principals have the same depth of pedagogical expertise as classroom teachers. Rather, principals need sufficient literacy content knowledge to recognize evidence-based instruction, interpret data, engage in informed conversations with teachers, and provide feedback that supports implementation of effective practices.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ This working knowledge includes understanding the major components of reading identified by the National Reading Panel,²⁰ how these skills develop over time, and the instructional practices associated with successful reading outcomes. Such knowledge enables principals to move beyond compliance-focused observations and instead support the quality and coherence of literacy instruction across classrooms.



This knowledge is particularly important during classroom observations and instructional conversations. Principals are not expected to evaluate every instructional decision made by a teacher. However, they should be able to recognize whether instruction reflects evidence-based practices and ask questions that prompt reflection. For example, a principal with foundational literacy knowledge can distinguish between instruction that encourages students to rely primarily on pictures or context clues to identify unfamiliar words and instruction that supports decoding through explicit phonics instruction and application in decodable text.^{21,22} In comprehension instruction, for example, leaders can recognize intentional text selection, background knowledge building, and structured discussion. As a result, feedback becomes more specific, actionable, and aligned to evidence-based practice. Rather than offering general comments about student engagement, principals can focus feedback on instructional practices and their alignment to schoolwide literacy goals.

Developing this level of literacy expertise requires intentional professional learning. Because most principal preparation programs have not historically emphasized reading science or early literacy instruction, school leaders cannot be expected to acquire this knowledge independently. States and districts implementing SoR initiatives must view administrator professional learning as a necessary component of successful literacy reform. When principals understand how reading develops, what evidence-based instruction looks like in practice, and how to use literacy data to support improvement, they are better positioned to create coherent systems, provide meaningful instructional leadership, and sustain implementation over time.²³⁻²⁵



Ohio has paired statewide SoR requirements with resources that help school leaders implement literacy initiatives effectively.²⁶ Through ReadOhio, principals receive access to professional learning, implementation tools, and guidance on using literacy data, supporting teacher learning, and reviewing instructional materials. Rather than focusing solely on compliance, Ohio's approach helps principals build the knowledge and leadership skills needed to support evidence-based reading instruction and continuous improvement across their schools.

Strengthening Instructional Coaching

Principals with a clear grasp of literacy content knowledge are more effective instructional leaders. This expertise allows them to provide meaningful feedback, ask the right questions during data conversations, and make informed decisions about curriculum selection. To support preK–3 teachers, administrator professional learning is more successful when it prioritizes coaching teachers to implement evidence-based practices with fidelity.^{27,28}

Evidenced-based support for early literacy coaching and teacher feedback cycles includes:

- Structured classroom walk-throughs aligned to research-based literacy indicators.
- Frequent observation of instruction with actionable feedback directly connected to instructional goals.
- Clear, evidence-based expectations for literacy instruction.^{29,30}

The Alabama Coaching Framework³¹ provides an approach to developing these expectations by creating a culture of coaching. For example, school leaders collaboratively develop a transparent commitment to literacy improvement, maintain a separation between the roles of principal and non-evaluative coach, and pose critical questions for reflection. The principal provides direction

at the beginning of the school year with clear data targets, professional learning goals, and the ways in which teachers will be supported toward the targets and goals. Ultimately, this expertise leads to more successful and coherent implementation of SoR, helping every child develop strong foundational literacy skills.

Aligning Systems for Coherent Implementation

Early literacy development requires high-quality instruction across classrooms, grade levels, and instructional settings. This system, at the school and district levels, needs to be intentionally aligned for coherent implementation. Without leadership for coherence, schools are more likely to experience fragmented implementation, inconsistent instructional expectations, and uneven teacher confidence, resulting in variable instructional quality and incomplete use of curriculum and intervention resources.³² In addition, a lack of coherence often leads to initiative overload, where competing programs and priorities dilute the impact of evidence-based practices. Effective principals address this by engaging in strategic de-implementation, intentionally removing or narrowing initiatives, programs, and assessments that are not aligned to evidence-based literacy goals in order to create the time, space, and focus necessary for high-quality instruction and intervention within constrained school schedules.^{33,34}

One way to align the system is to use a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) framework. Within MTSS, three tiers of core instruction (Tier 1), targeted intervention (Tier 2), and intensive support (Tier 3) are integrated through a shared instructional approach grounded in SoR; aligned, high-quality instructional materials; and a coherent, predictive assessment system. Recent guidance emphasizes that MTSS is most effective when Tier 1 instruction is strong and aligned to evidence-based practices, reducing the need for intervention and ensuring that supports across tiers are connected rather than siloed.³⁵⁻³⁷ Alignment provides leaders with a unified message to maintain a clear instructional focus so that teachers are not overwhelmed by disconnected mandates but instead supported by a cohesive system.



Evidence-based approaches to strengthening early literacy outcomes therefore require principals to lead aligned systems for coherent implementation. This includes:

- Anchoring all literacy supports in a research-based framework like MTSS. Supports include screening and diagnostic assessments, curriculum materials, intervention resources, coaching supports, and professional learning.^{38,39}
- Structuring schedules for daily, protected literacy blocks; time for intervention; and opportunities for teacher collaboration.
- Organizing professional learning communities (PLCs) around literacy goals. PLCs include shared observation protocols and student work analysis to support continuous teacher development.⁴⁰
- Using assessment systems strategically and coherently, prioritizing a limited number of high-quality assessments that are tightly aligned to state standards and measures of student performance. This includes universal screening to identify at-risk students, diagnostic assessments to pinpoint specific skill gaps, and progress monitoring to inform timely instructional adjustments, while avoiding over-assessment that limits time for instruction and data use.^{41,42}
- Measuring, tracking, and reporting student literacy growth in actionable ways, enabling data-driven decisions about instruction, grouping, and intervention supports. Schoolwide data routines use assessment results to inform coaching, professional learning, and resource allocation.⁴³

Mississippi is frequently cited as a leading example of coherent literacy implementation. The state aligned literacy legislation, professional learning, literacy coaching, assessment systems, and accountability structures around a shared vision for improving reading outcomes. Rather than treating these efforts as separate initiatives, Mississippi created a coordinated system across schools and districts to create the conditions for consistent implementation of evidence-based literacy practices and sustained improvement over time.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁸

When principals orient curriculum, instruction, assessments, and teacher supports around a shared literacy framework, they create consistent, high-quality learning across classrooms. This coordinated approach ensures that every student receives the structured guidance and practice needed to build strong foundational reading skills and also supports long-term literacy development.



Building principals' capacity to lead early literacy improvement requires more than isolated training opportunities; it depends on the broader conditions that states create to prioritize, support, and sustain that leadership. Because principals operate within state-defined systems of preparation, professional learning, and accountability, state education agencies play a critical role in ensuring school leaders are equipped to implement coherent, evidence-based literacy practices across grades.

Recommendations

States and districts can take the following actions to strengthen implementation of evidence based early literacy programs that build principals' capacity to lead coherent, high-quality literacy instruction across preK through the early grades.

» Recommendation #1: Build Principals' Literacy Content Knowledge

To ensure principals have foundational knowledge of reading development, evidence-based literacy practices, and implementation of SoR, states can:

- Establish statewide expectations that principals participate in professional learning focused on reading development, evidence-based literacy instruction, and literacy leadership. Define core leadership competencies that include reading development, foundational skills instruction, language comprehension, literacy assessment, and data-informed decision-making.
- Incorporate early literacy leadership competencies into administrator preparation, licensure, certification, and renewal pathways.
- Develop or provide access to high-quality professional learning opportunities, microcredentials, and leadership academies focused on SoR implementation.
- Partner with educator preparation programs, professional associations, and literacy experts to strengthen administrators' knowledge of evidence-based literacy practices.

Why this matters: Principals cannot support implementation of evidence-based literacy practices if they lack foundational knowledge of how reading develops and what effective instruction looks like in practice.

» Recommendation #2: Strengthen Instructional Coaching and Feedback

To equip principals to use literacy content knowledge to support teacher growth through observation, feedback, coaching, and professional learning, states can:

- Provide guidance and professional learning on conducting literacy-focused classroom observations and walk-throughs.
- Develop optional observation protocols and feedback tools aligned to evidence-based literacy practices and high-quality instructional materials.



- Build principals' capacity to analyze classroom evidence and provide actionable, implementation-focused feedback to teachers.
- Support the use of instructional coaching models that align administrator leadership, literacy coaches, and teacher professional learning.
- Establish leadership networks and communities of practice where principals can learn from successful literacy implementation efforts and examine real examples of effective feedback and coaching conversations.

Why this matters: Principals who understand literacy instruction are better positioned to provide meaningful feedback, support teacher implementation, and foster continuous improvement.

» Recommendation #3: Align Systems for Coherent Implementation

To support principals in creating coherent schoolwide systems that sustain evidence-based literacy practices, states can:

- Develop guidance that helps schools align curriculum, assessment, intervention, coaching, and professional learning within a unified literacy framework.
- Promote implementation of literacy-focused MTSS frameworks that connect Tier 1 instruction, intervention systems, and assessment practices.
- Provide tools that help leaders evaluate initiative alignment and identify opportunities for de-implementation of programs and practices that are not aligned to evidence-based literacy goals.
- Support principals in using literacy data to monitor implementation, allocate resources, and guide continuous improvement efforts.
- Invest in regional technical assistance, leadership coaching, and communities of practice that help principals sustain coherent literacy systems over time.
- Establish two-way feedback mechanisms that allow states to learn from implementation challenges while providing ongoing support to districts and schools.

Why this matters: Strong literacy outcomes depend on more than teacher practice alone. Principals must align instructional resources, assessments, interventions, schedules, and professional learning into a coherent system that supports implementation across classrooms.

Resources

The resources below provide further support for planning and implementing SoR-aligned instruction.

GUIDE  <u>Self-study Guide for Implementing Early Literacy Interventions</u> This guide from Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southeast helps district and school leaders conduct self-studies for planning and implementing early literacy interventions.	REPORT  <u>Five Policy Actions to Strengthen Implementation of the Science of Reading</u>  This report from the National Council on Teacher Quality outlines recommendations states should follow to strengthen their implementation of SoR.
GUIDE  <u>Developing Early Literacy Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)</u> This guide from REL Southeast supports the development of PLCs to implement evidence-based literacy instruction.	WEBSITE  <u>Instructional Coaching: Understanding the Role with Ready-to-Use Resources</u>  The website from the National Center on Improving Literacy provides a range of instructional coaching resources that can support the delivery of evidence-based literacy practices in classrooms.



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