



**SUPPORTING OUR YOUNGEST
READERS: LA READS**
Louisiana's Early Literacy Commission

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The Louisiana Department of Education worked with the Commission's co-chairs to provide resources and presentations for three Commission meetings and four workgroups, held between September 2019 and December 2019. Every Commission meeting was open to the public and also available as a livestream. The video link and meeting agenda were posted according to the state's open meetings law. Archived video links, agendas, and materials are publicly available on www.LouisianaBelieves.com.

The Commission's meetings have consisted of a review of research and best practices in early literacy including a review of current Louisiana Department of Education literacy initiatives. Commission meetings included local panelists who have shared their experiences in early literacy. Commission members and meeting attendees had the opportunity to ask questions and offer public comment. Local experts included teachers and curriculum and literacy leaders from Louisiana school systems.



Early Literacy Commission EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IMPORTANCE OF EARLY LITERACY

- ✓ Early literacy is a critical predictor of educational and lifelong success.
- ✓ Struggling with early literacy puts students at a greater risk of future academic struggles¹, including dropping out of school, and incarceration².

INVESTING IN EARLY LITERACY

The Early Literacy Commission believes that by the end of third grade, all Louisiana students should be proficient (“Mastery” level) in reading in order to successfully transition to higher grade levels and to be college and career ready. In order to ensure that more third grade students are proficient in reading by the end of the third grade, the following must be true:

1. Every teacher uses a high-quality curriculum to teach students the foundations of reading and language and literacy.
2. Every student who struggles to read receives timely research-based literacy interventions.
3. Every school has a culture in which all teachers are responsible for and equipped to deliver effective literacy instruction.
4. Every school leader maximizes the use of time and personnel through scheduling and collaborative planning.
5. Every teacher effectively uses evidenced-based practices to meet the literacy needs of all students.
6. Every educator preparation program emphasizes evidence-based literacy practices.

7. Every school system implements a comprehensive literacy assessment plan that includes valid and reliable assessment tools used for different purposes at different times during the school year.
8. Every teacher uses literacy assessment data to monitor students’ progress and inform instruction.
9. Every school community expands opportunities for parents and families to be engaged in their children’s literacy development.

All of these goals are certainly achievable. Louisiana teachers, students, and parents have been working hard to improve early literacy, and data shows progress. The recommendations of the Early Literacy Commission acknowledge the current progress and work but demand a push ahead. In order to accomplish the recommendations of the Early Literacy Commission, our school systems and schools need an investment.

WHAT CAN LOUISIANA’S POLICYMAKERS AND STATE PARTNERS DO TO SUPPORT EARLY LITERACY?

Louisiana’s future is tied to early literacy. Commit to \$15 million in annual funding to support school systems and schools as they implement these recommendations.

1 Reading on Grade Level in Third Grade: How Is It Related to High School Performance and College Enrollment? Retrieved from: https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Reading_on_Grade_Level_111710.pdf

2 Literacy Behind Bars. Retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007473.pdf>

LOUISIANA'S EARLY LITERACY COMMISSION

Believing that Louisiana's students are as smart and capable as any in America, the Louisiana State Department of Education's (LDOE) vision is to set high expectations for all students putting every child on the path toward a college degree or professional diploma. To achieve that vision, the state is focusing substantial efforts and resources to provide young learners and school age students with opportunities to develop reading and writing skills that will enable them to be successful in school from the beginning. To bolster these efforts, the legislature established the state-level Early Literacy Commission (the Commission) through Louisiana Senate Resolution 182 and [Louisiana House Resolution 222](#) (2019). The legislation calls on the Commission to develop and implement an aligned system to provide effective evidence-based reading instruction for children from birth through third grade.

The Commission's work builds upon the state's progress to increase reading proficiency of third grade students.

The Commission's appointees consist of school system and school leaders, educators, and parents. The Commission is co-chaired by Superintendent John White, the Louisiana State Superintendent of Education, and Dr. Susannah Craig, Board of Regents Associate Commissioner for Teacher and Leadership Initiatives. Other members include representatives from higher education and various educational organizations and a gubernatorial appointee.

Between September 2019 and December 2019, Commission members participated in the following activities to develop a vision and plan for early literacy:

- (1) Gather and analyze data to determine the degree to which evidence-based reading is being implemented with fidelity in the state's public schools and childhood care and education settings.
- (2) Conduct an assessment of the number of practicing educators, including K-3 teachers, special education teachers, and reading specialists, with training and skills in evidence-based reading instruction.
- (3) Assess the degree to which state colleges of education and alternative certification programs provide a program of study on evidence-based reading practices for K-3 teachers, special education teachers, and education specialists.

- (4) Make recommendations regarding how the state might ensure that all teacher preparation programs produce teacher candidates with the competencies needed to teach evidence-based instruction from day one.

- (5) Make recommendations regarding how to assist school systems to adopt reading programs that utilize systematic and cumulative evidence-based reading instruction.

- (6) Make recommendations regarding how the state can equip educators with the evidence-based competencies and skills needed to ensure the reading proficiency of third grade students.

- (7) Develop and propose a timeframe for increasing the reading proficiency of third grade students and establish benchmarks for the intervening years.

Commission meetings were guided by a variety of presenters and speakers, including school leaders and educators and LDOE staff. These experts emphasized several key messages:

- ✓ Literacy is among the most powerful predictors of school and life success.
- ✓ Teachers must be equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to effectively teach all students to read.
- ✓ Parents must be notified if students are struggling with reading and provided resources to help their child with literacy skills at home.

“Teachers need to know and practice how to provide explicit, systematic instruction in all five essential components of early reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.”

–Gracie Slack-Turner, *Redesign Schools Louisiana*

EARLY LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT

Louisiana Law ([R.S. 17:182](#)) and a policy established by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) require the administration of a literacy screener not later than thirty days after the beginning of each school year in the early elementary grades. The literacy screener is a brief assessment of a particular skill or ability that is typically predictive of a later outcome. The key skills measured at each grade level follow:

Kindergarten: Phonemic Awareness

First Grade: Phonics

Second Grade: Oral Reading Fluency

Third Grade: Reading Comprehension

School systems can choose from [four research based screening assessments](#). These assessments are valid and reliable tools to measure the skills listed above. A vast majority of school systems (around ninety-two percent) administer one of the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)* assessments – *DIBELS Next* or, the newer version, *DIBELS 8th*. Around six percent of school systems administer the *System to Enhance Educational Progress (STEEP)* assessment, and less than 2 percent of school systems administer the *Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress (STEP)* assessment.

Students' scores for all four assessments are reported as "On or Above Benchmark" or "Below Benchmark." Students who score "Below Benchmark" are considered "At Risk" for reading difficulties.

Findings over the last three school years show that scores have dropped at each grade level. For example, on average across all four grade levels K-3, the percentage of children scoring "On or Above Benchmark" decreased from 59.5 in 2017, to 57.2 in 2018, to 51.5 in 2019. This means fewer children are reading on grade level and more children are identified as "At-Risk" for reading failure each year.

The [Fall 2019 Reading Report](#) reveals the most alarming results. In sum, data show that only 43.2% of kindergarten students scored "On or Above Benchmark." Additionally, only 54.2% of first graders, 55.8% of second graders, and 52.8% of third graders scored at this same level.

Despite current efforts to improve literacy at these grade levels, these findings indicate the need for educators and policymakers statewide to prioritize a new set of actions that will turn the tide and produce positive literacy outcomes for Louisiana's youngest learners.

While early literacy screening results have declined in recent years, results from other assessments have improved. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tracks trends in student outcomes over both the short term and the long term. Louisiana's 2019 NAEP results³ showed that Louisiana's pace of improvement since 2009 in all subjects significantly exceeds national trends. Since 2009,

Louisiana has outpaced the national rate of improvement in every grade and subject. In Grade 4 Reading, from 2009-2019, the national public average scale score is down, but the Louisiana public average scale score is up 2 points. Also, the percentage of students at or above proficient nationally is up 2 percent, but in Louisiana, the percentage of students at or above proficient is up 7 percent. Louisiana ranks ninth nationally for improvement in average scale score and seventh for improvement of percentage of proficient students.

LEAP 2025 results⁴ also indicate progress in reading. Louisiana's students score highest and have seen the greatest improvement since 2015 in ELA. The percent of grade 3-8 LEAP 2025 ELA tests scoring Mastery and above was 44 percent in 2019, up from 43 percent in 2018 and 37 percent in 2015. Results for grades 3-12 in 2018 and 2019 were the same as grades 3-8.

To improve reading outcomes at the earlier grades and build on the progress made in later grades, greater attention must be devoted to pre-K-2. Building a strong foundation is paramount. The skills our students develop at one age level or grade must be built upon and reinforced in later grades. Furthermore, for our students to sustain gains made in one grade, they must continue to receive high-quality teaching in subsequent grades.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Though both early childhood community networks and school systems across Louisiana are working hard on many fronts to improve the quality of early literacy, challenges remain. These include:

- ✓ Every teacher is not using a high-quality curriculum to teach students the foundations of reading and language and literacy.
- ✓ Teachers are not receiving sufficient support to effectively implement high-quality curriculum.
- ✓ Teachers need additional support to teach the foundations of reading.
- ✓ Louisiana's accountability system, though inclusive of early childhood and 3rd grade through high school, skips K-2. This gap means that educators and families receive less information about how children are performing in these grade levels.

To address these challenges, Louisiana needs to build a seamless support system for early learning - one that prepares all children to achieve mastery in reading in third grade and beyond. Achieving this vision will require implementers at all levels -- from site and system leaders to classroom teachers - to embrace policies and practices that support a consistent, coherent approach to children's education that provides continuous, enhanced learning opportunities from pre-K through third grade.

3 Louisiana's 2019 NAEP Results Summary. Retrieved from: https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/links-for-newsletters/louisiana-2019-naep-results-summary.pdf?sfvrsn=bd999a1f_2

4 2019 LEAP Results Show Steady Improvement in all Subjects. Retrieved from: <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/newsroom/news-releases/2019/07/11/2019-leap-results-show-steady-improvement-in-all-subjects>

COMMISSION VISION

The Early Literacy Commission recognizes the importance of a strong literacy foundation in preparing children to succeed in school. Early literacy plays a key role in enabling the kind of early learning experiences that research shows are linked with academic achievement, reduced grade retention, higher graduation rates, and enhanced productivity in adult life.

The Commission's vision is for all Louisiana students to become proficient readers no later than the end of third grade as evidenced by performing Mastery on the state assessment.

COMMISSION GOALS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND MILESTONES

To achieve its vision of reading proficiency for all children, the Commission developed a long-term plan to improve early literacy in Louisiana with short-term and mid-term milestones along the way.

The Commission's plan establishes nine goals and a set of seventeen policy recommendations to achieve these goals.

The goals are:

1. Every teacher uses a high-quality curriculum to teach students the foundations of reading and language and literacy.

“High quality, evidence-based instructional materials help to maximize our most precious and fleeting resource, which is time with students.”

–José Guadarrama, *Firstline Schools*

2. Every student who struggles to read receives research-based literacy interventions.

3. Every school has a culture in which all teachers are responsible for and equipped to deliver effective literacy instruction.

4. Every school leader maximizes the use of time and personnel through scheduling and collaborative planning.

5. Every teacher uses evidenced-based practices to meet the literacy needs of all students.

6. Every educator preparation program emphasizes evidence-based literacy practices.

7. Every school system implements a comprehensive literacy assessment plan that includes different assessment tools used for different purposes at different times during the school year

8. Every teacher uses literacy assessment data to monitor students' progress and inform instruction.

9. Every school community expands opportunities for parents and families to be engaged in their children's literacy development.

The seventeen policy recommendations are divided into four key areas:

1. Instruction Materials and Intervention Materials

2. School System and School Leadership

3. Teacher Preparation and Professional Growth

4. Progress Monitoring and Communication

“Many parents do not understand the importance of early literacy or how they can help. Families with limited resources may experience even greater isolation from their children's schools. It is important that parents and caregivers are aware of the significant contribution they can make to their children's learning by providing a stimulating environment around language, reading and writing. It is critical they are equipped with the tools to recognize significant indicators of potential reading challenges. Strong communication between home and school and accessible resources should be key.”

–Gwen Hamilton, *parent and dyslexia advocate*

Table 1 below describes in detail the Commission’s recommendations for each key area as well as the goals and milestones for each recommendation.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS (TABLE 1)

Instruction Materials and Intervention Materials	
<p>Current State</p> <p>Eighty-four percent (84%) of school systems have adopted standards-based, high quality curriculum addressing the <i>foundations</i> of reading in K-2. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of school systems have adopted high quality curriculum that <i>builds knowledge</i> through language and literacy in K-2. Reviews of research-based literacy intervention programs began in Fall of 2019, but have not yet been published.</p>	
<p>Goal 1</p> <p>Every teacher uses a high-quality curriculum to teach students the foundations of reading and language and literacy.</p>	
<p>Goal 2</p> <p>Every student who struggle to read receive research-based literacy interventions.</p>	
Recommendation	Timeline/Benchmarks
<p>Review and, as needed, revise the Instructional Materials Evaluation Tool for ELA Grades K-12 (IMET). In addition to being fully aligned to Louisiana Student Standards, programs that receive Tier 1 ratings must provide evidence-based instruction methods that include writing and the five explicit, systematic components of literacy: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › March 2020: LDOE in consultation with stakeholders completes IMET revisions. › July 2020: LDOE begins facilitating reviews of ELA instructional materials using revised IMET. › November 2020: LDOE provides the Early Literacy Commission with an update on 2020-2021 reviews and a timeline on resubmission of programs currently posted as Tier 1.
<p>Review and, as needed, revise the Instructional Materials Evaluation Tool for ELA Intervention Grades 3 – 8 (IMET). In addition to being fully aligned to Louisiana Student Standards, programs that receive Tier 1 ratings must be data-driven, individualized by student, systematic, and provide explicit instruction on phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency. Add a non-required indicator addressing vocabulary and comprehension.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › March 2020: LDOE completes IMET revisions. › July 2020: LDOE begins facilitating reviews of ELA Intervention instructional materials using revised IMET. › November 2020: LDOE provides the Early Literacy Commission with an update on 2020-2021 reviews and a timeline on resubmission of programs currently posted as Tier 1.
<p>School system and school leaders ensure that every school and classroom has high quality instructional materials, including Foundations of Reading and Language and Literacy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › February 2021: School systems select a Tier 1 program for Foundations of Reading and Language and Literacy for every K-2 classroom for 2021-2022 as part of their annual improvement plan.

School System and School Leadership

Current State

Our most struggling schools (CIR and UIR) with 1st and 2nd grade classrooms are being observed using the [Literacy Observation Tool](#). From August–December 2019, LDOE staff completed over 200 first and second grade classroom observations across 45 LEAs in 101 schools. Third party observations were also completed in 76 classrooms. Observations indicate that teachers need additional support teaching the foundations of reading.

Goal 1

Every school has a culture in which all teachers are responsible for and equipped to deliver effective literacy instruction.

Goal 2

Every school leader maximizes the use of time and personnel through scheduling and collaborative planning.

Recommendation	Timeline/Benchmarks
School system and school leaders are continuously supporting high quality curriculum implementation in foundations and language and literacy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › February 2020-April 2020: LDOE will develop observer training for the English Language Arts Foundational Skills Grades K-2 classroom observation tool. › May 2020: At the 2020 Teacher Leader Summit, school system and school leaders will attend observer training for the English Language Arts Foundational Skills Grades K-2 classroom observation tool. Training will be required for CIR/UIR schools and available for all school leaders. › 2020-2021: School leaders will observe instruction using the English Language Arts Foundational Skills Grades K-2 classroom observation tool and provide clear, specific, actionable, and timely feedback to inform continuous improvement.
Every PreK-2 teacher and administrator is provided with high quality professional development that includes initial training and ongoing support focused on the Foundations of Reading and Language and Literacy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › 2020-2021: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School leaders will lead common planning time focused on learning Foundation of Reading units/lessons and Language and Literacy units/lessons. • School leaders will regularly observe teachers during Foundations of Reading instruction and Language and Literacy instruction. • School leaders will ensure that teachers receive one-on-one coaching from school leaders, literacy coaches, and/or mentors as needed. • K-2 mentors will complete literacy training. › February 2021: School systems select a PD vendor from the PD Vendor Guide that provides high-quality curriculum-connected training on the Foundations of Reading and on Language and Literacy as part of their annual improvement plan.
Create K-2 school schedules that incorporate daily foundational skills instructional blocks, language and literacy instructional blocks, daily time for interventions, and common planning time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › February 2020- April 2020: LDOE develops scheduling guidance and investigates changes to Bulletin 741. › May 2020: LDOE provides guidance to school systems and schools in developing master schedules › October 2020-January 2021: LDOE supports school systems and schools as they develop their master schedules for 2021-2022 › February 2021: School systems submit their master schedules for each school for 2021-2022 as part of their annual improvement plan.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Growth

Current State

Eighty-four percent (84%) of school systems partner with vendors to train teachers on the *foundations* curriculum in K-2. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of school systems partner with vendors to train teachers on the *language and literacy* curriculum in K-2. Vendors are not required to include the *foundations of reading* in curriculum training. At Louisiana institutions of higher learning, there are no common instructional materials for literacy methods courses.

Goal 1

Every teacher uses evidenced-based practices to meet the literacy needs of all students.

Goal 2

Every educator preparation program emphasizes evidence-based literacy practices.

Recommendation	Timeline/Benchmarks
Select and train Literacy Coordinators to provide support for literacy in K-2 schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Summer 2020: LDOE hires and trains between 75-150 highly qualified (e.g. reading specialists and reading interventionists) Literacy Coordinators using federal grant funds and any other available dollars. Each Literacy Coordinator will support 5-10 schools. › 2020-2021: LDOE Literacy Coordinators support literacy in K-2 schools
Select and train a literacy coach for every K-2 school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › January 2020-May 2020: LDOE works with a vendor to develop training in evidence-based reading practices that includes writing and five explicit, systematic components: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension; supporting students who struggle in reading; assessment and data; high quality curriculum; and building knowledge of the world to support PK-2 teachers. › Spring 2020: Schools nominate teachers. Training will be required for CIR/UIR schools. › 2020-2021: School based literacy coaches are trained. › November 2020: LDOE provides the Early Literacy Commission with an update
Provide K-2 mentor literacy training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › January 2020-May 2020: LDOE works with a vendor to develop training in evidence-based reading practices that includes writing and foundations of reading and language and literacy; supporting students who struggle in reading; assessment and data; high quality curriculum; and building knowledge of the world to support PK-2 teachers. › 2020-2021: K-2 mentor teachers are trained.
Review and, as needed, revise the PD Vendor Guide . Entries should clearly indicate which K-2 ELA vendors offer high-quality curriculum-connected training on the Foundations of Reading (phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency) and which vendors offer training in Language and Literacy (comprehension and vocabulary).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › January 2020-October 2020: LDOE investigates options to include vendors not connected to Tier I curriculum. › June 2020: LDOE completes revisions to PD Vendor Guide templates and process. › October 2020: LDOE releases updated PD Vendor Guide. › November 2020: LDOE provides the Early Literacy Commission with an update on the PD Vendor Guide.
Review and evaluate licensure assessments for PreK-5 and special education licensure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › January 2020-October 2020: LDOE Investigates current licensure and options for Literacy. › November 2020: LDOE provides the Early Literacy Commission with recommendations for assessment for Literacy and a timeline for licensure changes.
Provide literacy training for teacher-preparation and administrator-preparation program faculty.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › 2020-2021: LDOE invites teacher-preparation and administrator preparation program faculty to literacy training.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Growth

Review and, as needed, revise the process used to evaluate teacher-preparation and administrator-preparation programs to ensure that literacy coursework in PreK-5 includes the Foundations of Reading (phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency) and Language and Literacy (comprehension and vocabulary) and writing.

- > **January 2020–October 2020:** Develop resources (e.g. model syllabi and modules) for literacy coursework. Developed by LDOE in partnership with the Board of Regents, prep providers, and faculty representatives
- > **January 2020–October 2020:** LDOE works with the Board of Regents and College of Education deans to analyze the process used to evaluate current preparation programs and options for improving the focus on literacy.
- > **November 2020:** LDOE provides the Early Literacy Commission with proposed revisions to the process used to evaluate teacher-preparation and administrator-preparation programs.

Progress Monitoring and Communication

Current State

Louisiana’s accountability system is inclusive of early childhood, yet skips K-2 and then continues with 3rd grade through high school. This gap means that educators and families receive less information about how children are performing in these grade levels.

Goal 1

Every school system implements a comprehensive literacy assessment plan that includes different assessment tools used for different purposes at different times during the school year.

Goal 2

Every teacher uses literacy assessment data to monitor students’ progress and inform instruction.

Goal 3

Every school community expands opportunities for parents and families to be engaged in their children’s literacy development.

Recommendation

Timeline/Benchmarks

Build a clear accountability system for K-2 grades that defines excellence in each grade and incentivizes progress and rewards achievement. The system identifies one statewide screener, and early literacy is included in school profiles.

- > **2020–2021:** LDOE proposes to BESE, in consultation with the Accountability Commission, a K-2 accountability system
 - **November 2020:** LDOE updates Early Literacy Commission on K-2 accountability system development
- > **2021–2022:** School systems implement K-2 [accountability system](#).

Provide and explain assessment data to parents/caregivers regularly, including how the data will be used to adjust instruction.

- > **2020–2021:** LDOE works with schools and school systems to streamline their assessments, reflect on assessment data, and adjust instruction.
 - **November 2020:** LDOE updates Early Literacy Commission
- > **2021–2022:** Schools begin sending home updates on student progress in literacy.

Develop a parent portal with literacy resources and guidance including resources to support students who struggle including students with dyslexia.

- > **January 2020–October 2020:** LDOE outlines parent portal
- > **November 2020:** LDOE updates Early Literacy Commission on parent portal
- > **January 2021:** LDOE launches parent portal

Develop education/media strategies and a campaign to increase families’ and community stakeholders’ knowledge about the importance of effective literacy screening and instruction from birth to 8, as well as the components of effective literacy instruction.

- > **January 2020–October 2020:** LDOE builds a communication plan
- > **November 2020:** LDOE updates Early Literacy Commission on communication plan
- > **January 2021:** LDOE launches education/media campaign

FUTURE ACTIONS FOR THE COMMISSION

Louisiana must continue to work to ensure that more students are proficient in reading by the end of third grade students. In 2020, the Commission will receive reports from the Louisiana Department of Education on the use of any new funds and study the following areas through its meetings:

1. **Instructional Materials and Intervention Materials:** LDOE will provide an update on 2020-2021 reviews and a timeline on resubmission of programs currently posted as Tier 1.
2. **Teacher Preparation and Professional Growth:** LDOE will provide updates on literacy coordinators and literacy coaches, the PD Vendor Guide, recommendations for assessment for Literacy and a timeline for licensure changes, and proposed revisions to the process used to evaluate teacher-preparation and administrator-preparation programs.
3. **Progress Monitoring and Communication:** LDOE will provide updates on K-2 accountability system development, assessment work with schools and school systems, a parent portal, and a communication plan.