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WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD

Leveraging Literacy from Policy
to Practice in New Jersey



Executive Summary

In August 2023, armed with the knowledge that less than half of the state’s third graders were proficient in grade-level reading, JerseyCAN published a report, “Leveraging Literacy – The Path to Education Recovery in New Jersey.” JerseyCAN then formed the New Jersey Legacy of Literacy (NJLL) coalition and engaged deeply with legislators and other stakeholders for change.

In a short span of time, remarkable results were achieved. Two comprehensive literacy bills that directly addressed JerseyCAN’s policy prescriptions were passed.

The Big Wins – Recently Passed Literacy Laws and Statutes:

Science-of-reading training for classroom practitioners.

Teacher preparation programs aligned to the science of reading.

Universal literacy screening in the earliest grades.

Notification to parents for students with reading deficiencies.

Provisions for adoption of high-quality instructional and curricular materials.

Effective resource allocation for equitable systems.



While these are undoubtedly big wins, the battle is far from won. The challenge now lies in translating policy wins to actionable steps in New Jersey’s classrooms to help more children measurably succeed. New Jersey’s commitment to literacy must remain constant and consistent over time, regardless of changes in local or state leadership, particularly as New Jerseyans will elect a new governor later this year.

WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD

The New Jersey Working Group on Student Literacy –which included traditional public and public charter school district superintendents, teachers with varied specialties, librarians, and speech and language professionals, as well as parents and advocates – was mandated by law to research the issue of implementation of best practices in literacy and publish their recommendations for the state of New Jersey in a report, and that report is now publicly available.

Drawing from the Working Group’s recommendations, from guidance provided by the New Jersey Legacy of Literacy (NJLL) coalition, and from ExcelinEd’s Early Literacy Fundamental Principles, this white paper reflects JerseyCAN’s second round of policy pushes for our state to substantially increase New Jersey’s proficient readers. They serve as complements to the recently-passed literacy laws that can turbocharge the new legislation to make sure that each aspect of the new literacy laws is seamlessly integrated, and executed well.

THE CASE FOR MORE – 4 CRUCIAL POLICIES TO BUTTRESS NEW JERSEY’S NEW LITERACY LAWS:

- Provide ongoing, job-embedded literacy coaching for teachers.
- Eliminate the practice of word-guessing from meaning, syntax, or visual cues, also known as the “three-cueing” reading strategy, or MSV strategy.
- Require the development and implementation of customized reading plans for certain students identified with a reading deficiency.
- Require districts to provide families with data-informed read-at-home plans to support students identified with a reading deficiency.

Paula White
Executive Director, JerseyCAN

A SHORT STEP BACK

Details of New Jersey's Recent Literacy Progress

On August 13, 2024, in an admirable display of collaboration and resolve, policy and advocacy leaders under the umbrella of the New Jersey Legacy of Literacy (NJLL) coalition - as well as several state-level organizations embedded in New Jersey's professional education community, and others invested in literacy outcomes in New Jersey - joined with our most esteemed leaders in the state's legislative and executive branches as the New Jersey Senate Literacy Bill [S2644](#) was passed.

The bill, sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz, calls for science of reading/ foundational literacy training for classroom teachers, mandatory twice-yearly universal literacy screenings in the earliest grades, mandatory parent notification of student reading achievement, and a diligent process of informed selection of high-quality literacy instructional and curricular materials.



“If it’s good for kids, we’re gonna do it, we’re gonna do it right, and we’re gonna do it right now.”

Clint Satterfield

Director of Schools
Trousdale County Board of Education

The day also saw the passage of New Jersey Senate Bill [S2647](#), also sponsored by Senator Teresa Ruiz, which established the state Department of Education's Office of Learning Equity and Academic Recovery (LEAR). Through this office, “effective resource allocation for equitable systems to promote effective literacy” is addressed, calling for LEAR to mitigate observable learning gaps in New Jersey in our most acutely under-performing student populations — students of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities.

In addition, revised several months ago and effective as of September 2025, [New Jersey's Administrative Code's 6A:9B-10.2](#) will usher in regulatory revisions to improve state requirements for Elementary and P-3 certified teacher preparation programs.

These programs will have to be aligned to the science of reading, requiring that nine to twelve credits - or their equivalent - earned by teacher candidates focus on content knowledge for teaching reading and literacy to elementary students, including phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, reading comprehension, fluency, and concepts of print.



POLICY PUSH #1

Provide ongoing, job-embedded literacy coaching for teachers.

RECOMMENDATION #6

Develop a robust and accessible professional learning platform to support diverse adult learning needs, address a range of professional roles, and encourage pathways for growth.

RECOMMENDATION #16

Support district implementation of HQIM by providing access to evidence-based professional development for all members of the learning community, including school and district leaders.

JerseyCAN recommends a multimillion dollar state budget allocation to fund ten or more literacy coaches to support teachers' foundational literacy practices, and subsequent annual allocations to yield continuous improvement. This is a crucial step to increase New Jersey's troubling overall third grade English Language Arts proficiency rate of 44%, and it aligns with the New Jersey Working Group on Student Literacy, which noted that "... professional learning should be ongoing and job-embedded, supported by ongoing virtual and/or in-person coaching."

Widely considered to be the gold standard of effective teacher professional development, literacy coaching is personalized and occurs within the context of an educator's teaching and learning environment. It embraces teaching as a concerted professional pursuit where classroom-based support is frequent and targeted, not "one off" or performative. We strongly endorse literacy coaches to help usher in New Jersey's robust literacy laws and we believe that the state's new Office of Learning Equity and Academic Recovery (LEAR) can serve as the quarterbacking agent for this effort.

This direct call for job-embedded coaching reinforces a finding published in a 2022 brief from the Research Partnership for Professional Learning (RPPL). The brief, which focused on determining what works for teacher professional learning, found two features most significant to efficacy: supporting teachers' day-to-day practices and having accountability for improvement and change. These features are most clearly found in job-embedded coaching, where literacy coaches plan with teachers, go into classrooms to observe and support teacher practice, and follow up on agreed-upon next steps.

Unlike school administrators, literacy coaches have no evaluative power over teachers; their roles are rooted in collegiality, collaboration, and trust. In Mississippi, where both school-based literacy coaches and those from the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) have played integral roles in the state's remarkable literacy improvement, the MDE asserts that "literacy coaches will provide a non-threatening, open, professional, and collaborative relationship...". This framing underscores the value of the coaching role in building a strong K-12 literacy infrastructure.

CASE STUDY #1

The Power of a Literacy Coach

On a recent school visit in Trousdale County, Tennessee, I sat in a first grade reading class where the teacher used a "sounds first" approach. Students were using whiteboards to write down various spellings of a single phoneme; their teacher pulled student-labelled popsicle sticks from a cup to solicit answers to her questions so that all students would have an equal chance to participate.

The teacher read a story aloud, and the teacher's post-reading questions required students to have conversations with each other, and to cite textual evidence when responding to the teacher. Later, I ran into the teacher I'd observed and complimented her on the robust lesson. Her response centered entirely on how instrumental her relationship with her literacy coach was to the quality of her teaching practice.



POLICY PUSH #2**Eliminate the use of the meaning, syntax, visual cues, known as the “three-cueing” reading strategy, or MSV strategy.****RECOMMENDATION #10**

Develop a two-part rubric for LEA selection of instructional materials that a) requires robust support for high-quality foundational literacy classroom instruction including phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension aligned to the MTSS model.

RECOMMENDATION #17

Develop a strategic, evidence-based approach to selecting intervention materials that align closely with adopted core instructional materials, ensuring consistency and coherence in student support.

The New Jersey Working Group on Student Literacy cited a 2019 study which reported that in a researcher’s review of schools’ instructional materials, only 7% were found to be fully aligned to standards. This makes clear that educators stand to benefit tremendously from experts’ directives that define the important features of good literacy curricula.

Given the centrality of curricular materials to the teaching and learning process, JerseyCAN supports the recommendation of a rubric for instructional materials that vets reading curricula for alignment to state standards regarding the tenets of high-quality foundational literacy, explicitly mentioning literacy components spelled out in New Jersey’s literacy laws (i.e. phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). However, we believe components that should be excluded from a high-quality curriculum should also be mentioned to ensure that schools do not unwittingly undermine the foundation they are building for early literacy. This is the case with the inadvisable three-cueing strategy, which relies on visual cues, like pictures, and guessing about meaning to assist in the reading process.

An [EdWeek Survey](#) found that as recently as five years ago, three-fourths of teachers in the early elementary grades taught students to use the three-cueing system

and 65% of college education professors taught it as well. This means guessing words from unreliable or insufficient information and looking at pictures to assist with reading, rather than the appropriate strategy of using word-attack skills to decode a word. This might lead three students seeing the same picture to say three different words (e.g., rock, pebble, or stone), all of which might have some connection to the picture but only one of which is right.

Providing a quality control measure by calling out the peril of the three-cueing strategy will only help classroom teachers as well as college and university professors as they work to shift their practice to New Jersey’s literacy-related laws and regulations, focusing on evidence-based practices in reading.

Another of the Working Group’s recommendations works in tandem with this — aligning interventional materials with core instructional materials. This means if a strategy is not advisable in intervention materials, it shouldn’t be present in core instructional materials. The three-cueing strategy has such a weak evidence base to justify its use that its presence in interventional materials could be devastating to a struggling reader. This is a compelling reason to move away from it in all materials.

CASE STUDY #2**An Emerging Reader**

Consider James, a second-grader who is reading a book and comes across the sentence, “Imani raked the flower bed in her father’s garden.” A struggling reader, James might look at a picture in the book, make an inference about what Imani may have done, then look at the first two letters in the word “raked” and say, “Imani raised the flower bed in her father’s garden.”

This would be incorrect but both “raked” and “raised” might make sense in the story at that time so James would move forward with his faulty assumption. However, since only one of those words is actually correct, the difference between the two meanings is likely to impact comprehension later in the text.

Now, imagine James relying on this strategy, which is fraught with inaccuracy, over and over again. This is an ineffective way to develop a reader.



POLICY PUSH #3**Require the development and implementation of customized reading plans for certain students identified with a reading deficiency.**

Two recommendations that pertain to addressing the needs of students identified with a reading deficiency are to identify a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) — New Jersey’s MTSS system is branded as the New Jersey Tiered System of Student Supports or NJTSS — and providing tools to monitor students’ progress that reflect instructional coherence across all tiers.

NJTSS has three tiers:

- **Tier 1** — the universal instructional support that every student receives in baseline, whole-group instruction;
- **Tier 2** — the targeted, small group interventions that some students receive;
- **Tier 3** — interventions provided to the students who need the most intensive level of support.

The system steers teachers with students who need significant support to plan for these students based on their individual needs, rather than only using whole group instruction when for certain children, more is needed.

RECOMMENDATION #4

Prioritize the selection of tools that offer progress-monitoring capabilities to provide educators with ongoing feedback regarding student learning aligned to the MTSS model.

RECOMMENDATION #17

Develop a strategic, evidence-based approach to selecting intervention materials that align closely with adopted core instructional materials, ensuring consistency and coherence in student support.

Considering the ladder of support outlined in NJTSS, customized reading plans for students identified with a reading deficiency coincide with the goal of being able to monitor a student’s progress; this will help teachers maintain a data-driven approach to fill the gaps of student knowledge that would become evident from universal screener data.

To be clear, creating a customized reading plan for a child is not synonymous with the process of seeking special education services or with a student receiving an Individualized Education Program (IEP), nor is this a solution for students who may just have an eclectic trajectory of internalizing content. Rather, it is a plan that identifies discrete literacy-focused skills that a repeatedly challenged student does not have and creates action steps to help the student acquire the needed skills.

Customized reading plans address the unique academic blind spots or weaknesses of a student, in keeping with NJTSS. Such a plan could require the selection of purchased remediation materials aligned to the core instructional materials, or it could entail a teacher-selected strategy drawn from a database of strategies supported by evidence.

CASE STUDY #3**Customized Support**

Jana and her sixth-grade classmates are working on New Jersey ELA state standard L.VL.6.3C, which states, “Use common, grade-appropriate Greek or Latin affixes and roots as clues to the meaning of a word (e.g., audience, auditory, audible).” During one class period, Jana’s teacher reads a short paragraph aloud, featuring words with the root *spect*. The students share what they think *spect* means, and are then taught it is a Latin root meaning “to look” or “to see.”

Students have multiple opportunities to engage with *spect* - from the teacher’s direct instruction, to talking in pairs and generating words with the root, and working individually on sentence creation for “spectator,” “retrospect,” and “inspection.” During this class - and for the past couple of months - Jana has consistently had trouble internalizing vocabulary solely from the strong Tier 1 instruction in her class, so the teacher created a customized learning plan for Jana.

This Tier 2 plan includes creating word maps for vocabulary, encoding the root of the word in a different color than the rest of the word; e.g., inspection, then drawing a scene that features the word before writing a sentence that corresponds with the scene and includes the target vocabulary word. For the word “spectator,” Jana drew a picture of herself at a hockey rink looking down on the ice at a hockey game being played. She also composed the following sentence, “Jana sat bundled up in the bleachers, as an excited spectator at her brother’s hockey match.” This word mapping of vocabulary is a key part of Jana’s customized reading plan.



POLICY PUSH #4

Require districts to provide families with data-informed read-at-home plans to support students identified with a reading deficiency.

The New Jersey Legacy of Literacy (NJLL) Coalition has expressed deep concern about ensuring that parents are properly supported by their school settings to help their children succeed in reading. Relatedly, the Working Group recommended that schools should go beyond the legal requirement of notifying parents their children have been identified as having a reading deficiency, to “prioritize family engagement over passive notification”.

This matters because without a clear notion of how to help their child improve, parent notification can serve as little more than a source of stress or shame. Marginally literate parents, non-English-speaking parents, and even highly literate parents may all lack understanding of the actual process of reading acquisition so many might either do nothing to support their children’s reading

RECOMMENDATION #8

Develop and provide schools with a portfolio of clear, consistent, engaging, and accessible information for families to support a common language around early literacy development.

efforts, or support their children in misguided ways, reinforcing counterproductive behaviors.

Thus, beyond notification, a read-at-home plan — i.e., a plan for a set of concrete actions aligned to a child’s performance that families can follow at home — provides an opportunity for schools and families to partner together to improve a child’s mastery of reading. Read-at-home plans provide specific language for parents to understand and use with their children, as well as concrete activities to do with their children for better reading acquisition.

CASE STUDY #4

Practicing Reading At Home

Mariela, Laverne, and Josh are all parents of kindergarten students. After the fifteenth week of school, their children’s teacher creates read-at-home plans for the students who have been identified with a reading deficiency. Mariela and Josh get a read-at-home plan that the teacher goes over in-person with Mariela and on a Zoom video call with Josh. The plan explains language related to literacy development like “print-rich home” and “segmenting words” and provides specific activities to do at home. For example:

Ten-Minute No-Screen Read

Read with your child for ten minutes with every screen off wherever you are. This means no television on, no phone turned on, and no gaming device being used — just you, your child, and a book!

Moving Magnets

Place magnetic letter tiles on your refrigerator. Ask your child each day to say a word with the beginning sound of one of the letters. When they do so correctly, say the sound out loud together, and remove that tile from the refrigerator until all the tiles are gone, then start the game all over again.



THE CASE FOR MORE

Summary of Recommendations & Next Steps

Given the strength of the Working Group’s report and national policy benchmarks established for literacy learning, we have identified a Top 4 list of new commitments that will further increase the number of children reading proficiently in New Jersey.

The following commitments, which complement our new regulations and laws, are all associated with better student learning:

1	Provide ongoing, job-embedded literacy coaching for teachers.
2	Eliminate the use of the meaning, syntax, visual (“MSV”) three-cueing reading strategy.
3	Require the development of individual reading plans to be implemented at school for students identified with a reading deficiency.
4	Require districts to provide parents with clear, accessible data-informed plans to be implemented at home for students identified with a reading deficiency.



At all levels of literacy ambassadorship — from legislators to the professional education community and the education advocates in New Jersey — New Jersey has proven how powerful we can be when marshalled around a common goal. That common goal — substantively better reading outcomes for New Jersey’s children — has yet to be achieved, and we are thus charged to continue working together for the benefit of our children.

With our legal and statutory framework in place, the foundation of a literacy infrastructure is now being built and it needs help to be as strong as possible. JerseyCAN’s four recommendations explained in this paper will help to create the finished literacy product that students and educators need and that New Jersey’s families deserve. By adding these features, New Jersey will succeed in securing a future for our state that is powered by a literate population. Indeed, this is the reason we do this work.

JerseyCAN extends deep gratitude to its board and all of the partners, colleagues, and organizations collaborating with us that have helped to make this paper as well as all of our broader literacy work for New Jersey’s children possible.