



Public Schools of North Carolina
State Board of Education
Department of Public Instruction

Report to the North Carolina General Assembly

Recommendations from the Reading
Improvement Commission

Session Law 2017-57, Section 7.26B.(b)

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This document provides recommendations to be considered by the General Assembly pursuant to SL 2017-189, Section 7.26B.(b), *Reading Improvement Commission*.

SECTION 7.26B.(b) The Superintendent of Public Instruction shall establish a Reading Improvement Commission (Commission) within the Department of Public Instruction to study and make recommendations on the following:

- i. Best practices for public schools in the State to improve reading comprehension, understanding, and application for students in grades four through 12 to ensure that students complete high school with literacy skills necessary for career and college readiness;
- ii. Methods to monitor student progress and provide appropriate and timely remediation to students to ensure success on nationally norm-referenced college admissions tests
- iii. The effectiveness of professional development in the area of literacy in developing the capacity of teachers in grades four through 12 for improving student performance and reading
- iv. Whether requiring professional development in the area of literacy for licensure renewal would be effective in improving student performance in reading and, if so, how such professional development should be structured and provided in order to maximize student outcomes.

Throughout 2018, members of the Reading Improvement Commission (“Commission”) met formally six times for almost 20 hours in total, discussing and debating the best ways to respond to the directives charged to them by the North Carolina General assembly. Members of the Commission included:

Malbert Smith, CEO, MetaMetrics
Cecilie Lewis, Teacher, Wake Co
Jeff Isenhour, Principal, Catawba Co
Jeanene Burris, Asst. Principal, Burke Co.
Denise Morton, The Hill Center
Marcia Kosanovich, CEO, MK Educational Research & Practice, LLC
Julie Kowal, AVP of P12 Policy & Strategy, UNC System Office
Ann Harrington, Teaching Associate Professor, NC State
Dennis Davis, Professor, NC State
Suzanne Baker, Advisor, Bethlehem Community Center Infant-3 Nurture Program
Kris Cox, Executive Director, READWS

It is the goal of the Reading Improvement Commission to recommend best practices, defined as research-based practices based on the highest standards of evidence available, that may inform change in practice at the state level, district level, and school level. Each recommendation is intended for an audience of policymakers at the state level, with specific examples intended for an audience of district- and school-level policymakers and practitioners.

Definitions

To set expectations around this report, the following terms are defined as follows:

Reading Comprehension. Reading comprehension is the process of constructing a mental model of the ideas expressed in a written text. Reading comprehension depends not just on decoding skills but on vocabulary and background knowledge. Proficiency in this process depends on the reader's development of a set of underlying skills and knowledge, including word recognition, reading fluency, background knowledge of the topic, and vocabulary/language abilities. Reading comprehension is necessary for students to successfully learn from the texts they encounter across all content areas.

Career- and College-Readiness. In North Carolina, students are considered career- and college-ready when they have the knowledge and academic preparation needed to enroll and succeed, without the need for remediation, in introductory college credit-bearing courses in English language arts and mathematics within an associate or baccalaureate degree program. These same attributes and levels of achievement are needed for entry into and success in postsecondary workforce education, the military, or directly into a job that offers gainful employment and career advancement.

Career- and College-Readiness Literacy Skills. A student in grades four through 12 will exhibit career- and college-readiness literacy skills when the student:

- without hesitation, engages with and comprehends complex texts (print and digital) written for a variety of purposes;
- thinks critically about what they read and hear, employing their evidence-based reasoning skills; and
- communicates and problem-solves in collaboration with others.

Best Practices: Any best-practice must be supported by research on the highest standards of evidence available.¹²

The Need

Efforts across the nation to improve foundational literacy in grades K-3 have led to more resources and improved teacher training for our youngest readers. Yet the same supports and attention have not yet been expanded to upper elementary and adolescent readers on a broader scale. In fact, students at the secondary level continue to demonstrate lower literacy skills than their counterparts in other developed nations. According to the ACT, only 40% and 60% of college-going students nationally met college-ready benchmarks in math and reading, respectively. As a result, colleges and universities develop and offer remedial or developmental courses, many of which do not provide students with academic credit. Research shows that up to 50% of students will not

¹ <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>

² https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/rti_reading_pg_021809.pdf

complete such courses and thus are unlikely to obtain a college degree. In North Carolina, students who enrolled in a community college and were required to take developmental English were 17.4% less likely to earn their associates degree. Also disconcerting is that while remedial courses are necessary for gaps in knowledge, they do not recognize and support gaps in skills. Skills such as comprehending, evaluating complex texts, synthesizing information, and clearly communicating their ideas in writing are necessary for students to be successful in college or career. When students are less prepared to read and comprehend complex texts required in college, their overall academic performance suffers, and these struggles may persist into the workforce.

According to the NAEP, in the past 20 years, the reading proficiency rate for North Carolina's 8th graders in reading has only grown three percent, from 30% in 1998 to 33% in 2017. In the last academic year, only 44% of North Carolina's public high school students met the college-readiness benchmark in English on the ACT. The urgency is great and all North Carolina students – including students in grades four through 12 – must be equipped with college- and career-readiness literacy skills before they graduate from high school. It is the goal of the Reading Improvement Commission that these recommendations be used to affect changes to state policy, local policy, and school-level actions.

Recommendations

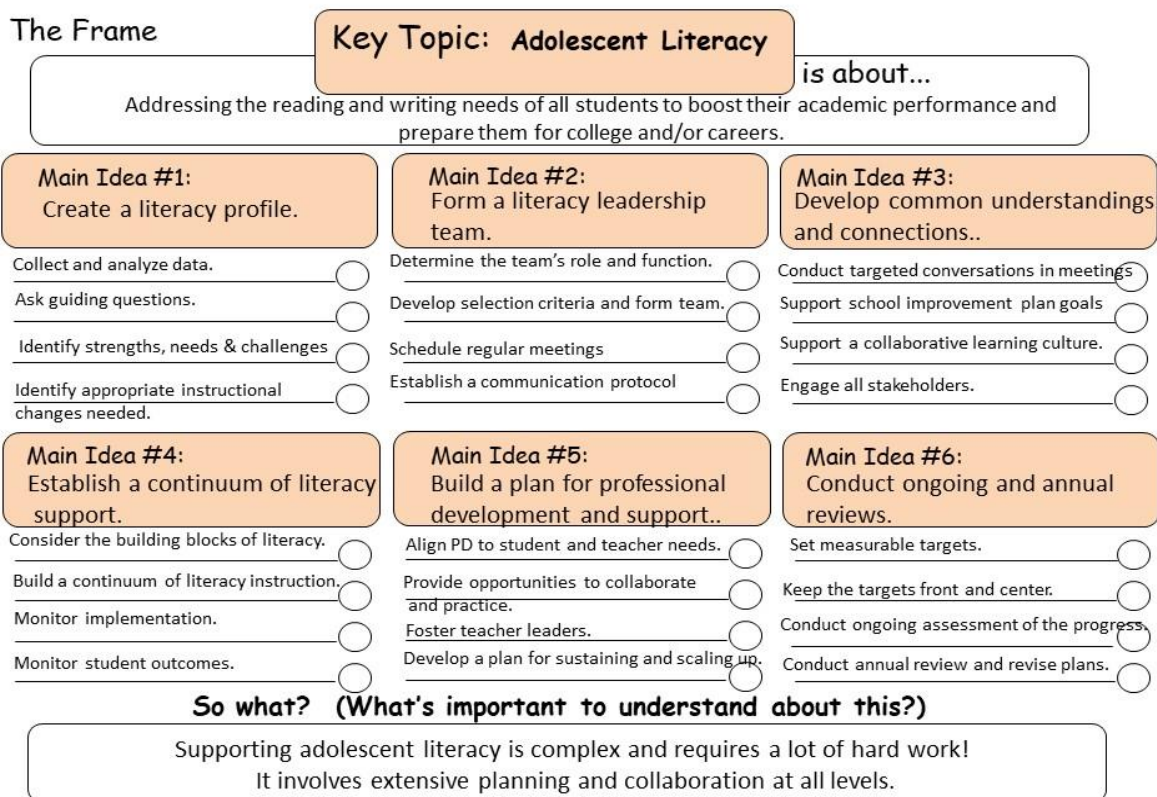
Directive One. The Commission was directed to:

Recommend best practices for public schools in the State to improve reading comprehension, understanding, and application for students in grades four through 12 to ensure that students complete high school with literacy tools necessary for career and college readiness.

Success looks like:

- Every student at every grade level engages with complex and relevant texts – for all media (print and digital) – without hesitation.
- Every student at every grade level uses evidence-based reasoning skills to critically think through what they read and hear.
- Every student at every grade level communicates and problem-solves collaboratively with others.

1a. Adolescent literacy must be a school-wide effort. All educators – not just English language arts teachers – bear responsibility in ensuring that all students in their school are improving their college and career literacy skills. School district leaders must ensure that teachers at all grade levels are providing literacy instruction that is systematic, explicit, evidence-based, and delivered with fidelity. Students who continue to struggle with reading in upper grades need extensive support from their teachers, no matter the content. Without adequate decoding and fluency skills students will continue to struggle with comprehension, understanding, and application strategies. For example, the North Carolina State Improvement Project has been employing the Adolescent Literacy Framework to address the reading and writing needs of students to boost their academic performance and prepare them for college and career. The Adolescent Literacy Framework



guides schools through six main areas to consider when developing a district/school plan to address adolescent literacy.

1b. All students must be exposed to complex texts. Every student – including students who struggle with reading – must be exposed to complex texts that they will encounter in later grades, in their careers, and/or in college. Research indicates that students make more gains when they are exposed to complex texts. School districts can encourage integration of complex texts by providing targeted professional development to teachers in grades four through 12, providing them with evidence-based strategies that would give struggling readers meaningful opportunities to successfully engage with complex texts. Additionally, teachers can support their struggling readers with strategies such as:

- Providing an informative amount of pre-reading that builds background knowledge and vocabulary, but avoids giving too much away about the text;
- Sequencing text-dependent questions to help students comprehend the difficult portions of texts;
- Utilizing text sets to build student background knowledge and vocabulary necessary for understanding anchor texts;
- Completing a text complexity analysis that examines both the qualitative and quantitative features to determine if a text is complex enough for students.

1c. In improving adolescent literacy, **educators must deliver evidence-based practices with fidelity.** With support from the Department of Public Instruction, districts may offer technical assistance and training to support schools and districts in ensuring teachers are delivering best-practices with fidelity.

STRATEGY

One strategy for exposing an entire class to complex texts for any content is allowing students to participate in a Socratic Seminar. A Socratic Seminar is a formal discussion, based on a text, in which the leader asks open-ended questions. Within the context of the discussion, students listen closely to the comments of others thinking critically for themselves and articulate their own thoughts and their responses to the thoughts of others. They learn to work cooperatively and to question intelligently and civilly. Teachers will choose the text at the appropriate level of complexity that students should read in advance. It is helpful to number the paragraphs in a text for easy referral to the passages.

Directive Two. The Commission was directed to:

Recommend methods to monitor student progress and provide appropriate and timely remediation to students to ensure success on nationally norm-referenced college admissions tests.

Success looks like:

- Every teacher at every grade level in every subject has the time and formal space to assess student progress.
- Every student at every grade level is given the time and formal space to reflect on their academic progress.

2a. In regard to formal assessments, **school leadership must ensure that classroom learning time is protected.** The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction may provide scheduling recommendations to every suggested assessment tool to give educators suggestions for scheduling so that teachers will have time to assess data, analyze data, make decisions informed by that data, and finally plan to implement changes informed by that data. Regional support teams may provide guidance and coaching to schools and districts in how to use assessment data to design instruction. Additionally, school districts should review and analyze their policies regarding benchmarking assessments and discuss how to assess progress toward various knowledge and skills with fewer, more quality assessments.

2b. School leadership must ensure that time spent on reading intervention needs is protected. With all of the demands placed on educators and the school day calendar, efforts to improve upper elementary and adolescent literacy are likely to be sidelined unless they are protected. This guarantee may be reflected in system-level guiding principles or policies. Each of these guiding principles or policies is likely to require district or state action regarding calendar flexibility, staffing allocations, and professional development offerings.³

STRATEGY

One example for protecting reading intervention time in the middle grades may be Book Club. For 30-45 minutes every other morning, students are grouped according to reading level – as opposed to grade level – to read and discuss books with educators. For proficient and advanced readers, this time could be valuable time to challenge their reading skills with more complex texts. For struggling readers, this time would be for remediation in a small group led by a teacher using evidence-based strategies. For a principal to implement this strategy they would need scheduling flexibility, time for educators to plan discussion topics and group students according to the strengths and weaknesses of each student, and professional development for educators leading the interventions.

³ https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/adlit_pg_082608.pdf

2c. Tools to monitor progress must be a part of a comprehensive assessment system. A comprehensive assessment system includes three integrated components: summative assessments, formative assessments, and diagnostic assessments.

- **Diagnostic:** Diagnostic assessments are the most personalized. Diagnostic assessments are used to identify which students that according to the summative and formative assessments are not on target for college and career readiness. This level of assessment can dig deeper and provide teachers with diagnostic information to identify the root problem(s) (phonemic issues, vocabulary, dyslexia, etc).
- **Formative:** In addition to looking at end of year growth, formative assessments can be utilized by educators to monitor student progress in reading within the academic year and to personalize a learning plan for each student. The two primary methods for monitoring progress toward long-term reading outcomes include:
 - Curriculum-Based Measurement that typically assesses the rate, accuracy, and comprehension of adolescent readers and,
 - Computer-based assessments that appropriately adapt questions to locate student reading skills across important domains.
- **Summative:** In North Carolina, a summative assessment (NCEOG and NCEOC) assesses reading comprehension and is required for every student in grades 3 through 8 and at grade 10. Data from this summative assessment provides policymakers, educators, and parents with valuable information about annual growth and achievement levels.

A comprehensive assessment system means that each assessment works together to provide a high-quality, standards-aligned, technically-sound student assessment system that assists educators in making informed and personalized educational and instructional decisions about each student.

Directive Three. The Commission was directed to:

Recommend the effectiveness of professional development in the area of literacy in developing the capacity of teachers in grades four through 12 for improving student performance and reading.

Success looks like:

- Every teacher at every grade level in every subject has access to resources to help them answer this question: “how may this lesson allow students to practice literacy skills?”
- Every teacher at every grade level in every subject incorporates a chance for students to practice literacy skills in every lesson.

3a. Efforts for educators in the secondary grades to receive professional development in adolescent literacy should be scaled up. Historically, not much evidence-based professional development has existed for educators in the secondary grades regarding adolescent literacy. In response, the North Carolina State Improvement Project has been offering various high-quality professional development for educators throughout the state and throughout the year to both Exceptional Children and General Education teachers spanning across all grade levels and content areas. More information about these professional development courses is listed below. Certified state- and district-level instructors should build the capacity of instructors of the trainers of these programs. Additionally, North Carolina’s postsecondary institutions should consider offering these courses in their educator preparation programs.

3b. Enhance the pedagogical knowledge of both educators and administrators, especially in the disciplines, focused on understanding comprehension as a process/practice. As schools and districts are encouraged to build teacher capacity in literacy instruction, school and district leadership must have the proper knowledge to inform their decision-making process in building said teacher capacity. If the leadership team chooses a certain literacy program, they must know what questions to ask vendors so that the evidence-based program will explicitly focus on students’ instructional needs. Considering school leaders are usually the individuals who make professional development decisions for teachers, they will need to know what questions to ask of vendors so that their teachers will have access to professional development that is differentiated, systematic, job-embedded, and ongoing. Some schools may not have the resources to offer their teachers with a specific professional development opportunity, so it is critical that schools and leaders are able to select programs and opportunities that are specifically tailored to students’ needs and have a demonstrated positive impact on academic outcomes. One immediate strategy to meet this recommendation is for school leaders to use the Observation Checklist for High-Quality Professional Development Training (HQPD Checklist). The Checklist was designed to measure observable indicators of effective professional development consistently. The HQPD Checklist is a valuable tool for professional development providers when designing and reflecting on training content, and for evaluators when monitoring the quality of professional development. Another strategy is for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to create a clearinghouse of proven professional development models and offerings from which school leaders may select.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN NORTH CAROLINA

- 1. Reading Research to Classroom Practice (RRtCP).** This course is open to any K-12 educator. It provides educators and administrators with the foundational knowledge needed to support students with persistent reading challenges, including dyslexia. This rigorous course includes literacy instruction utilizing evidence-based strategies along with a comprehensive assessment system to guide instruction. Topics include Phonological Awareness, Phonics, Word Recognition, Spelling, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension. Specific strategies using explicit, multisensory, systematic instruction are modeled and delivered using case studies and active participation.
- 2. Adolescent Literacy Planning.** The Adolescent Literacy framework introduces recommendations to consider when establishing and planning a school-wide approach targeting 4th-12th grade content literacy for all students. This opportunity offers a systematic approach for the identification of strengths and weaknesses in literacy programming, development of a literacy leadership team, and methods to design a collaborative environment that fosters shared responsibility for learning so that the needs of all students are met to more fully access content-area curriculum.
- 3. All Leaders Understand, Support, and Collaborate to Provide Evidence-Based Instruction.** This is an opportunity for district and building leadership teams to dig deeper into components of Implementation Science. Leaders are guided through activities as a team during a face-to-face day to understand the compelling why of authentic engagement in school improvement. Teams collaboratively use tools provided by the National Implementation Research Network to focus on building readiness, implementation stages, implementation teams, and implementation drivers, ultimately gaining the skills to develop, implement, and evaluate district and school plans that support the improvement of core content instruction and achievement of students with disabilities.
- 4. Co-Teaching: Calling All Administrators and Co-Teaching for Teachers: Going Beyond the Basics.** This opportunity provides school administrators an overview of the service delivery model of co-teaching and practical tools used to give substantial support to both the general and special educators implementing co-teaching in their schools. Administrators discuss considerations for the selection of staff and students for co-teaching, planning for implementation, scheduling, the importance of collaborative planning, the six approaches utilized in the classroom that enhance universal design for learning, and evaluation of effective co-teaching implementation.
- 5. Deep Dive into Dyslexia:** Dyslexia Impacts an estimated 5-20% of the population. While dyslexia exists on a continuum from mild to severe, it is one of the most prevalent types of a specific learning disability. This professional development opportunity explores the definition and characteristics of dyslexia and shares evidence-informed assessment and instructional practices for word recognition, fluency, and spelling.

Directive Four. The Commission was directed to:

Recommend whether requiring professional development in the area of literacy for licensure renewal would be effective in improving student performance in reading and, if so, how such professional development should be structured and provided in order to maximize student outcomes.

4. All K-12 teachers, regardless of licensure area, should successfully complete professional learning in the area of literacy for license renewal. Every teacher deserves to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to apply literacy strategies in their classrooms and with opportunities to continually improve their practice. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction should consider working with members of the state’s Professional Educator Preparation and Standards Commission (PEPSC) and State Board of Education to define criteria and processes for license renewal standards to ensure that all public-school teachers can successfully implement evidence-based literacy practices and interventions with their students.

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