EdAllies

THE READ ACT AT 3

> Implementation Insights from Four Minnesota Schools

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Introduction

The Minnesota READ Act went into effect during the 2023-24 school year and represents a multifaceted approach to align literacy instruction with research tied to the Science of Reading (SoR). It outlines clear and ambitious requirements for data use, curriculum and instruction, and professional development, with an emphasis on transparency across all stages of implementation. Its effects reach nearly every corner of school practice, from curricular materials to classroom and school-level strategies. In this report, we examine the impact of recent changes to literacy instruction as well as lessons learned from four schools working to align their literacy practices with READ Act legislation.

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READ Act Implementation Insights

Literacy Practices and Learnings from Four Metro Schools

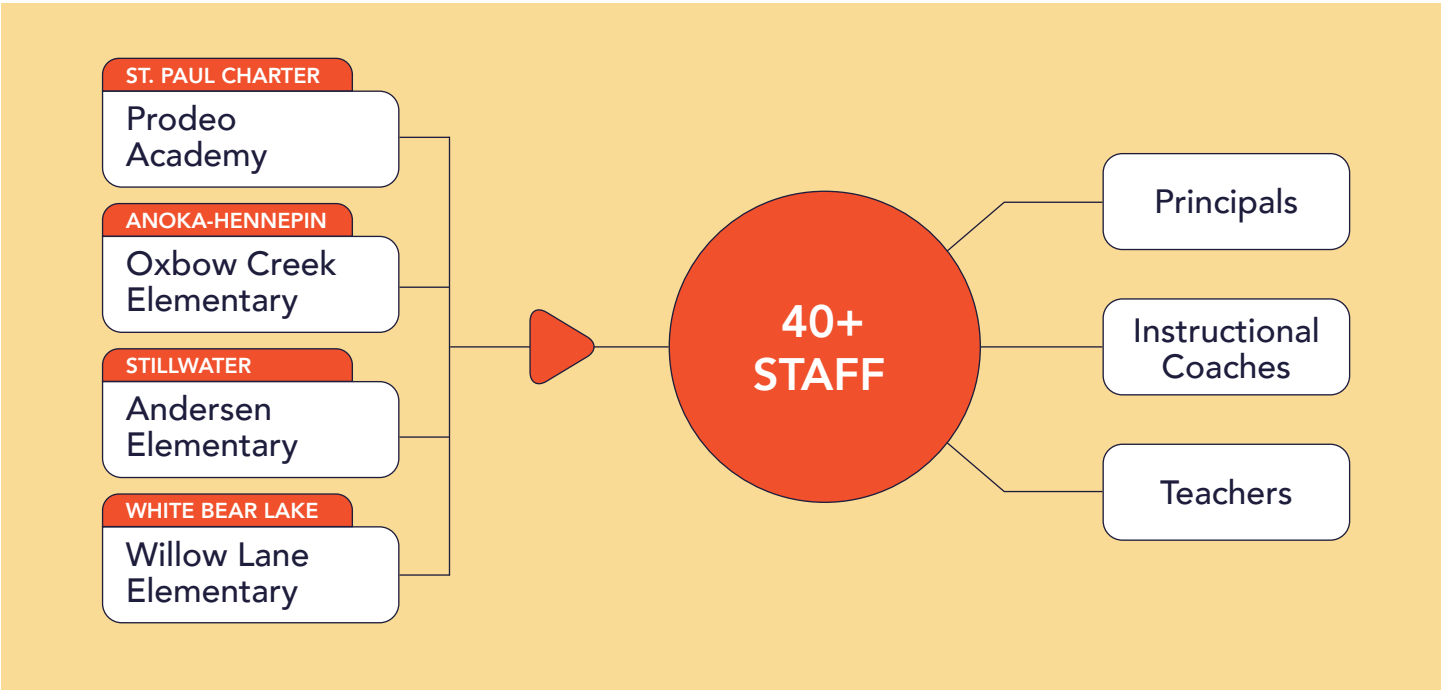
Three years into implementation, schools across Minnesota are at different stages of adoption and progress toward the READ Act's key goals. While the legislation mandates certain practices, such as staff training for specific categories of educators and regular screeners, day-to-day practice and priorities are left up to local schools and districts and outlined in annual local literacy plans.

Most schools have adopted curricula aligned with the Science of Reading, making changes to instructional practices, early intervention, and data-based decision-making, though varying approaches across districts require ongoing learning and growth based on the successes, challenges, and patterns of practice among schools. In this report, we explore what this looks like in practice to support implementation and next steps.

READ ACT AREAS OF FOCUS

- > Curriculum
- > Professional Development
- > Data Collection and Use
- > Multi-Tiered Systems of Support
- > Reporting

In 2024, EdAllies released literacy profiles for two schools that were observing promising literacy growth. This report builds on those profiles to examine common strategies, instructional shifts, and enabling conditions across four different school settings, selected based on demonstrated progress in the data and to represent different settings and student populations. In total, we interviewed over 40 school staff across four schools including principals, instructional coaches, and teachers. In the pages that follow, we summarize findings from those conversations, focusing on key themes and recommendations that can inform practice



Partnering Schools: At a Glance

Partnering schools represent a range of communities, enrollments, and student populations. Schools were selected to reflect diverse contexts while demonstrating promising literacy performance or evidence of high-quality literacy practices.

	Prodeo Academy	Oxbow Creek	Andersen	Willow Lane
DISTRICT	ST. PAUL CHARTER	ANOKA-HENNEPIN	STILLWATER	WHITE BEAR LAKE
ENROLLMENT	258	1,116	297	292
STUDENTS OF COLOR	99%	41%	16%	74%
LOW-INCOME	87%	26%	17%	66%
ENGLISH LEARNER	67%	11%	5%	19%
SPECIAL EDUCATION	26%	20%	19%	22%

Source: Minnesota Report Card, 2025

READ Act Materials and Procedures Across Schools

The READ Act sets requirements in multiple areas but also leaves some choices to districts. Teacher training must come from a state-approved menu of three programs (LETRS, CAREIALL, or OL&LA) and screening data must be collected three times each year in K-3 using a state-approved tool. There is more variation in curriculum selection. The state reviews curricula and assigns them to categories according to their alignment with evidence-based, structured literacy practices. Schools can use funds associated with the READ Act to pay for "Highly Aligned" curricula, whereas "Partially Aligned" curricula may be used but requires districts to supplement gaps with their own resources. The table below shows how each partnering school navigated these choices.

	Prodeo Academy	Oxbow Creek	Andersen	Willow Lane
SCIENCE OF READING TRAINING	CAREIALL	LETRS	LETRS	LETRS + OL&LA
CURRICULA	UFLI Foundations (highly aligned) Functional Morphology (highly aligned)	Bridge2Read (highly aligned) Amplify (CKLA) (partially aligned)	UFLI Foundations (highly aligned) Benchmark Advanced (partially aligned)	Amplify (CKLA) (partially aligned)
UNIVERSAL SCREENING	FastBridge (Triannual)	FastBridge (Triannual)	FastBridge (Triannual)	FastBridge (Triannual)
PROGRESS MONITORING	Weekly (all students)	Weekly (Tier 2/3)	Weekly (Tier 2/3)	Weekly (Tier 2/3)

Partnering Schools: 2024–25 Data Bright Spots

Prodeo Academy

- **11% decrease in students who "Did Not Meet" state standards in 3rd grade** over the last year.
- **5% increase in MCA proficiency** in grades 4 and 5 over the last two years.
- **50-percentage point increase in kindergarten students meeting the letter sounds benchmark and 22-percentage point increase in 1st grade students meeting the decoding benchmark** from fall to spring.

Oxbow Creek Elementary

- **5% increase in 3rd grade MCA proficiency** and a **4% increase in 5th grade MCA proficiency** over the last year.
- **More students met FastBridge benchmarks across all metrics in grades K-2**. In kindergarten, the percentage of students meeting expectations increased sharply **from 66% in the fall to 92% in the spring**.

Andersen Elementary

- **More than 10% decrease in students who "Did Not Meet" state standards in 3rd and 4th grade** over the last year.
- **Proficiency rates for students from low-income families increased** 9% for 3rd graders and 11% for 4th graders.
- **More students met FastBridge benchmarks across all metrics in grades K-3**, including a 26-point increase in decoding skills among kindergarten students and a 20-point increase among first graders.

Willow Lane Elementary

- **9% increase in MCA proficiency** across all grades relative to 2024.
- **Percentage of kindergarten students meeting FastBridge benchmarks tripled** across the year, from 24% in the fall to 77% in the spring.
- **19-point increase in 1st-grade decoding benchmark attainment** from winter to spring.

Impact Highlights

All four schools demonstrated impact trends in their literacy data. However, interviews created the opportunity to dig deeper into patterns of READ Act success, highlighting areas of growth that might otherwise go unnoticed.

From Training to Conviction

For many of the staff we interviewed, there was a clear and tangible impact on their knowledge and beliefs about instruction, intervention, and data use. Professional development served as a key introductory step, but the belief in the strategies and practices promoted by the READ Act clearly came from practice, collaboration, and proof points. In addition to seeing changes in their students, staff found themselves talking about reading instruction more, which created connection points that naturally strengthened buy-in and consistency.

Students as Reading Scientists

Beyond the data, teachers and coaches consistently pointed out other benefits for kids. All schools observed students demonstrating a more systematic approach to reading, acting as scientists as much as learners. Students were reported to notice features of words they didn't before, correct each other, and name and apply reading strategies unprompted. For many teachers, this felt like students treating reading as something that can be figured out rather than something that simply happens by spending more time with words and stories.

Structure as a Pathway to a Love of Reading

The READ Act promotes an approach to literacy instruction characterized by highly structured, teacher-driven instruction. A prevailing concern about this approach is that it has the potential to reduce creativity and joy for reading. Schools observed the opposite. Despite a legitimate learning curve for teachers, students are engaged during lessons, excited for language arts time, and increasingly interested in reading on their own. The structured and systematic approach to instruction was generally viewed as working for kids, increasing their confidence, competence, and in turn, their love of reading.

"I'm amazed at how they're looking at print in different ways and picking things apart that I normally wouldn't expect them to…they really understand how words are made up."

— Teacher, Oxbow Creek Elementary

"The conversations that children are having are deeper, they're richer, and they're having them without us asking. I've overheard two students in the corner of the room having a conversation about characters or about the main idea or a connection they have."

— Teacher, Andersen Elementary

"Kids being very excited and invested in what they're reading and learning is something that we haven't really seen before...And I see kids just having that joy of reading that I think has been missing for a while."

— Elementary Principal, Prodeo Academy

"Their interest in reading has just skyrocketed. I have groups of kids who bring chapter books to school from home and they're sharing them with each other and they're reading to each other… in first grade."

— Teacher, Oxbow Creek Elementary

Schools differed in their experiences associated with the READ Act. Yet, several themes emerged across schools that help illustrate conditions and practices that validate the policy in practice and provide guidance for future implementation. Read on to learn more about themes that emerged from school interviews.

KEY THEMES

KEY THEME #1
Shifts in Knowledge Enable Shifts in Practice

Staff at participating schools reflected a strong sense of the READ Act's purpose, its underlying research base regarding student needs, and the practical implications that follow from that literature base. This sense of purpose was both pervasive and durable, with staff regularly highlighting new learnings as a driver of the necessary changes to practice. That is, the pattern of changes in staff knowledge was an underlying requisite for the success of structural and instructional changes in the school.

Shifting views of how students learn to read was a multi-faceted process in schools. Staff reported changes in their knowledge of foundational literacy skills, the explicit strategies required to build those skills, and the value of data to guide instructional strategies.

Even schools that had been using explicit literacy instruction for many years reported growth in their understanding that helped shape their current approach to literacy instruction. Schools that once treated intervention as the primary response to struggling readers reported a repositioning of their focus on strong core instruction. As one district leader put it "you can't Tier 2 your way out of a Tier 1 problem."

Further, many schools highlighted additional factors that helped increase long-term buy-in such as seeing improvements in student performance relative to previous years and having school leaders willing to be transparent about their own intellectual growth related to the science of reading.

"I learned a lot in LETRS. I feel like as a teacher, I've grown a lot. So, no matter what curriculum comes next in 10 years, we have a better understanding of how kids learn to read."

— Teacher, Andersen Elementary

"We were doing what we were told to do, right? But we were doing reading groups and telling them to find picture clues and find parts of the word…now we know that that just was not teaching kids to read words."

— Teacher, Oxbow Creek Elementary

"I've taught fifth grade for ten years and I didn't even know how to do the phonetic sounds correctly. That was eye opening and I've heard that a lot from educators…just how much that training changed the way they looked at what they did."

— Principal, Willow Lane Elementary

"Previously, students would receive phonics in K-3, and then after third grade if you didn't need phonics anymore, we were just kind of done… Now what we've done is we've shifted so older students are still learning more about word parts and I think that has been really helpful."

— Elementary Principal, Prodeo Academy

KEY THEME #2
The Importance of Rollout Strategy

Educators who described the most satisfaction and the strongest implementation routinely highlighted the value of system-level strategies to mitigate the pressure to do everything at once. The READ Act is composed of simultaneous requirements including new curricula, data use, professional development, and intervention structures. During interviews, schools made a compelling case for focusing attention on specific areas each year across a multi-year strategic plan to reduce stress and burnout. The strategy behind sequencing varied, but the impacts were similar, with teachers emphasizing the importance of balancing implementation expectations with staff cognitive load.

Sequence the Learning

As Oxbow Creek rolled out changes to their literacy instruction, teachers were exposed to materials and expectations for practice in incremental ways. For many teachers, exposure progressed from foundational professional development to formal curricular materials in ways that helped them focus on different elements of practice.

Sequence the Demands

At Andersen, the district opted to emphasize certain elements of their literacy approach over others during rollout, devoting professional development and coaching to a strategic set of skills.

Sequence Across Time

At Prodeo, key elements of the READ Act have been in place for many years, and school leaders now take a data-based approach to selecting a focus area by reviewing data from the previous year to drive professional development, coaching, and data meetings for the upcoming year.

"We had LETRS and we didn't have Bridge to Read and we didn't have CKLA…we just put it into practice with the content we had…And then we gradually went into phonemic awareness...then we got Bridge to Read and some of us have been doing that for three years…And now this year we added CKLA. Each step of the way there's discomfort… but it's been nice to kind of gradually perfect this and then add the new thing."

— Teacher, Oxbow Creek Elementary

"You can throw spaghetti at the wall. It doesn't mean it's going to stick. And if they can't letter-sound map, they're not going to letter-sound spell…Telling teachers that we're not going to focus on writing broke me in a million different ways. But the reality was we weren't going to do it well. Taking that year to say 'we need to fix this before that' was hard and I still think about it, but it was the right move."

— Teaching and Learning Supervisor, Stillwater

KEY THEME #3
From Data Collection to Data Use

Every school we interviewed reported changes to how they collect and use data, and staff were consistently positive in their views of those changes. Schools reported efforts to make more data accessible, build stronger knowledge of how data connect to instruction, and foster a more cohesive understanding of student needs and growth across all staff.

Schools approached data collection and review in slightly different ways, but all schools collected comprehensive data on student literacy skills using universal screening tools and other assessments tied to their curricula.

Moving Past "More Data"

Simply having access to more data was much less important relative to the infrastructure for data review and action procedures. All schools had recently made changes to create regular data review sessions that included virtually all staff who interact with students. This new emphasis strengthened staff skills in data interpretation and collaborative problem-solving. Those skills often translated directly into instructional changes that would not have happened without the infrastructure to support them.

Similarly, many schools included students in the data review process, helping students set goals and monitor their progress in ways that boosted their engagement in learning.

The use of data was pervasive across all four schools. Staff cited the READ Act as a primary driver of change—and there are sections of the legislation that explicitly call out expectations for data collection and use—but they were equally quick to emphasize how much data use had expanded on the legislation, being integrated into daily practices for school leaders, teachers, and students.

"In the past it was kind of like we were told from people who worked with our kids: 'here's where they should go'… Now it's been a lot more collaborative… 'where do we all think, as we all look at the data, is the best thing every kid needs?'…And it's also broken down a few of the silos across student groups. It's become more of 'our students."

— Teacher Focus Group, Willow Lane

"I think there's a much greater developmental awareness K-5 of the markers our kids need to be reaching. We did not have that awareness before really looking at the science of reading…And we have to use data to know if our kids are developing those essential skills."

— Principal, Andersen Elementary

"In kindergarten you'd think 'ah!' but I would start with the nonsense words, give them their score and would actually have them graph out their success so they could see it visually. By the end of the year they were motivated and excited to say 'hey look at where I've grown.' Even at the age of five and six they were aspiring to do better."

— Teacher, Andersen Elementary

"If you want to fix an achievement gap, you better know where it is."
—Primary Principal, Prodeo Academy

DATA CULTURE SPOTLIGHT: Prodeo Academy

All four schools reported meaningful changes to their approach to data and highlighted several benefits associated with those changes. Prodeo serves as an exemplar of those practices, illustrating how integrating regular formative assessment can drive change for instruction and student learning.

Data Collection

In 2nd and 3rd grade, Prodeo collects screening data using FastBridge assessments and progress monitors students receiving Tier 2 support bi-weekly. Kindergarten and first grade take this a step further, monitoring the progress of all students weekly. Progress monitoring at Prodeo is organized around "power skills" sequenced as letter naming, letter sounds, nonsense word fluency, and oral reading fluency. Assessments are matched to student need within and across grades, with students progressing after meeting benchmarks. However, students continue to be monitored even after meeting benchmarks, a guard against the regression the principal has seen once structured practice ends.

Prodeo teachers also record videos of students reading as a source of data, looking at examples of high, mid, and low performance levels. Leaders and teachers watch the videos together, examining accuracy, fluency, and behavioral indicators like eye movement and confidence.

Data Use

Prodeo matches their comprehensive approach to data collection with comprehensive data review focused on action. Data meetings occur often enough at Prodeo that it's difficult to distinguish these conversations from daily practice. The school holds formal data review meetings every six weeks to make resource allocation decisions, but structured data review happens weekly. "The classroom teacher is sitting side by side looking at their computer with the educational assistant being like, 'Look what Rebecca did this week. Oh my god, it's because of that thing you did with her in the morning."

Student data are also a cornerstone of coaching and planning meetings, where the focus of data review helps guide professional development.

Impact

Beyond the observed benefits to skill growth, there have been a host of additional benefits associated with data use at Prodeo. For example, the weekly data review sessions uncovered stagnant growth for nearly all students over a period of weeks, prompting teachers and leadership to institute more formal reteaching, which in turn produced a jumpstart to previously stagnant growth profiles. As the K-1 principal describes: "The curriculum will say 'take time to reteach.' We just didn't know how often to do that, how long. Now we know: group 8 to 10 lessons together, coupled with a one-week reteach. That just needs to be the case."

Teachers and leaders at the school also highlight data as a driver for skill maintenance, viewing assessment as both a tool for information and a tool for practice. "In them having to recall the information for an assessment, it's really just like building and retaining that knowledge. It helps kids' learning get really, really sticky." The video analysis practice has generated its own category of insight. By watching videos of students reading, Prodeo staff noticed that fluent readers were blending the first two sounds then adding the third, and said "let's teach everybody to do that." That practice—referred to as connected phonation in the research literature—was something Prodeo teachers focused on before having a name for it.

Similar to other schools, Prodeo also emphasized the impact of data collection on student engagement in their own learning and the science of reading itself. Students set goals for their progress and were often just as interested in seeing their progress as teachers. Further, in some cases, teachers shared footage with their class of their peers reading, inviting students to observe and comment on what their classmates were doing to read well. That is, giving students the chance to think critically about fluent reading has helped give them a common language and more systematic orientation to their own practice and learning.

KEY THEME #4
Learning and Coaching as Drivers of Success

During interviews, staff were clear about which professional development opportunities worked best for them. **In most schools, recent or ongoing changes to coaching aimed to create more authentic and meaningful contexts for improvement.** Schools differed somewhat in their approaches to professional development and coaching, but were remarkably similar in what they perceived to be most impactful.

When it Comes to Professional Development, Delivery Matters As Much as Content

All staff found the LETRS or CAREIALL training to be an important driver for their own learning. However, the most impactful experiences for practical implementation were driven by videos of exemplar lessons and opportunities for practice-based learning in person. When learning was online or lacked modeling, teachers found themselves wanting more. That is, teachers wanted to see what good instruction looks like before being asked to produce it themselves. A half or full-day professional development session is helpful, but seeing it in action and getting the chance to practice with feedback was by far the most cited characteristic of effective PD experiences.

Extending Professional Development to School-Based Learning

Outside of LETRS and CAREIALL, staff highlighted the value of school-based opportunities to strengthen their skills. At Prodeo, staff participate in building-wide professional development before students arrive that includes live demonstrations of lessons, practice in small groups, and real-time feedback focused on the nuances of curriculum implementation. That experience sets the stage for the year. "You're getting PD in August about it, and then you're getting live coaching on it, a coaching debrief on it, and a data debrief on it. It's like a trifecta—without one piece, I don't think it would be effective."

A Shift in the Coaching Landscape

A renewed and structured focus on literacy helped schools we spoke with shift coaching from an administrative "checklist" to more substantive coaching tailored to high-quality literacy instruction. In some cases, this meant rebuilding trust in the observation process. As the instructional coach at Willow Lane noted "I want people to know that I'm going to be collaborative and support their student learning." At Oxbow Creek, the instructional coaches provide teachers the option to model a lesson, be observed, or go watch a colleague, which lowered the pressure dramatically, especially for upper-grade teachers who were new to the curriculum.

At Prodeo, where principals operate as instructional coaches, the nature and frequency of coaching is varied enough that the pressure around coaching and feedback has largely disappeared. Teachers are observed at least weekly (often more) and principals are observing 2-3 times a day. Yet good coaching remains a balancing act. Across schools, teachers were clear that trust was important, this meant that observers needed to be recognized as strong teachers who could model when needed and that observations were constructive without being punitive.

The Power of Peers

Regardless of how often they were observed by school leaders, or how effective professional development was, teachers unanimously agreed that observing their peers deliver instruction (and being observed by their peers) was one of the most powerful tools for learning. There is an intuitive appeal to watching someone work through the same curriculum and lessons in real-time. As a kindergarten teacher at Oxbow Creek noted: "Getting into our peers' classroom and being able to observe others teach the exact same lessons and then it's like, 'Oh, I didn't even think about doing that.' And being able to add all of these little snippets together to enhance your practice."

"Teachers love watching other people do it…being able to take in everything from the text and then see it in action, that's really what teachers need."

— Teacher, Oxbow Creek Elementary

"Coming from where I come from, if an admin was in your room every day, you've got something to worry about. Now it's the complete opposite. When they're in our classrooms, they're like other teachers in the room."

— Teacher, Prodeo Academy

Lessons for Practice

The themes in this report describe what four schools are doing, but patterns in practices across schools point to recommendations that might help all schools. Some of these lessons reflect themes introduced previously while others surfaced consistently in interviews without fitting neatly into any one theme. Together, they offer a practical guidance for schools at any stage of READ Act implementation.

1. Sequence the Rollout

The READ Act includes a bundle of related shifts for educators and the school environment, and taking it all on at once comes with a cost to cognitive load and burnout. Across schools, staff emphasized the importance of small steps, consistency, and time to absorb each change before adding the next. Schools are seeing success with rigorous but feasible implementation plans. The schools reporting the deepest implementation spread the work across a multi-year plan and organized each year around a clear priority.

"Focus on just the one or two areas to really get good at, and don't feel like you have to do it all…take on a little bit more as you can to learn it and to grow it so that you can build on it in the following years." — Teacher, Andersen Elementary

2. Long View, Forward Momentum

Even schools who are seeing success are quick to acknowledge how hard some of the changes can be. Naming that difficulty internally without using it as an out helped keep staff engaged. On one hand, staff emphasized the importance of action. As Prodeo's primary principal put it, "look at the data, see where it's most important to start, and just start — you will figure it out." Yet, even schools far along in implementation tended to measure progress in years, with special attention toward growth. One literacy specialist described a good first year of curriculum implementation as getting about halfway to perfect. This means celebrating smaller wins. A good week of data, a crisp lesson delivery, and other daily occurrences add up over time. Further, when students don't hit year-end benchmark goals, staff emphasized the importance of considering growth alongside dichotomous proficiency designations. For example, a student might be considered "not proficient" in the fall and spring, but their performance might be much closer to benchmark in the spring. That kind of interpretation helps recognize impact and maintain momentum without ignoring the ultimate goal.

"As soon as we got that first win, as soon as we got kids doing the thing and outperforming peers…it was like a wheel going downhill. It just started turning itself… If people are struggling to start, find your first win." — Teaching and Learning Supervisor, Stillwater

3. Leverage Early Adopters to Build Momentum

Exceptional school leaders balanced top-down training and expectations with more authentic cultural shifts led by teachers. The READ Act is a statewide mandate; however, schools are unique ecosystems and the strongest buy-in happens when all staff are convinced that changes to literacy instruction are in the best interest of the children they support. In some of the schools we interviewed, early adopting teachers were a major driver for change. They sought out new practices, piloted them, and principals gave them space to talk about results. In some cases, grade level teams adopted new curricula before the entire school, which created opportunities for other teachers to learn and observe science of reading practices in their own context.

"Teachers who get excited about it spread the word, and it sounds better coming from them than from us." — Literacy Specialist, Oxbow Creek Elementary

Lessons for Practice

4. Maximize Exemplars & Practice in Professional Development

When possible, prioritize training that is in-person, involves many opportunities to see exemplar videos or live examples of instruction, and includes practice with feedback. The professional development that teachers valued most was delivered by people who had actually taught the curriculum, included demonstrations of what good science of reading instruction looks like, and kept sessions focused and bite-sized. Further, some of the strongest reactions to PD impact emphasized the value of extension activities organized by grade-level teams and coaches that offered low-pressure opportunities to practice back in the classroom.

"Long exhaustive PDs aren't helpful. I think drilling down to the bite-size thing… and not doing a lot of talking, but doing a lot of practicing was what was most important." — Elementary Principal, Prodeo Academy

5. Separate Coaching from Evaluation

The best coaching and learning experiences in schools were rigorous and critical, but also largely non-evaluative. Every school with strong coaching made that distinction visible, albeit with different methods. Teachers might be given multiple entry points for coaching (be observed, watch the coach model, or visit a colleague), options to select an area of focus, or simply participate in a coaching and observation process that is frequent enough to make observations feel like part of daily practice rather than a high-pressure event. Regardless of the coaching model, who was doing the coaching mattered as well. Teachers valued coaches with a record of strong teaching and clear knowledge of science of reading-aligned instruction and sometimes were more wary of coaches without those credentials.

"We created a lot of entry points for teachers so that they could use whatever entry point felt safest to them." — Literacy Specialist, Oxbow Creek Elementary

6. Facilitate Peer Observation

Teachers unanimously highlighted the powerful learning that happens when observing their peers teach lessons from the same curriculum. In some cases, these observations were helpful for seeing exemplar lesson delivery. In others, it was helpful to see other teachers wrestle with the same challenges in instruction and problem-solve together. Cross-grade observation, where teachers visit classrooms above and below their grade, also offered benefits by building a shared language for the full reading progression. In many schools, observing early-elementary classrooms gave upper-grade teachers a window into foundational skills instruction their own grades had traditionally spent little time on. Likewise, early elementary teachers who observed upper elementary classrooms came back energized by new alignment in language and practice.

"They really want to learn from one another. We've created an environment, a culture here that it feels safe enough to be able to do that...this work is too important to not do it with your colleagues." — Principal, Andersen Elementary

Lessons for Practice

7. Make Data Everyone's Job

The READ Act introduces new data collection requirements but it's the way in which those requirements are folded into a culture of problem-solving in schools that matters most. Building routines where all adults who support a student's learning review data together and own the decisions that follow strengthened instruction and deepened collaboration in the school. Willow Lane's principal called this the "ultimate first thing." Staff noticed and appreciated changes to the school schedule that resulted in regular and collaborative data-based decision-making. Further, extending data use to students themselves through goal-setting and self-monitoring was a motivational tool, with students as young as five or six years old responding positively to the opportunity to track their progress.

"Teachers started looking at their data, feeling good about their data, wanting more data, wanting to move it." — Teaching and Learning Supervisor, Stillwater

8. Plan for a Learning Curve in Upper Elementary

Plan for the possibility that third through fifth grade students may have missed foundational instruction in early grades, and recognize that the ask of upper elementary teachers is steeper than lower elementary. Standard intervention structures are not enough for this transitional cohort and schools saw traction when they focused on bridging phonics to advanced word study, spent dedicated time on teacher buy-in, made space for intervention time focused on decoding and fluency in the upper grades, and continued Tier 1 phonics-level support past third grade.

"Previously, students would receive phonics in K-3, and then after third grade if you didn't need phonics anymore, we were just kind of done...Now what we've done is we've shifted so older students are still learning more about word parts and I think that has been really helpful." — Principal, Prodeo Academy

9. Build Systems that Outlast Individuals

Across all schools, staff turnover and funding-related attrition were among the most consistently named threats to success. No school described this problem as solved; however, the schools seeing success paired intentional hiring and retention with internal structures built to bring new staff into an already high-functioning system. Whether it's a high-functioning grade-level team, an effective instructional coach, or a strong leader, successful implementation inevitably runs through specific people, and people leave.

Schools approached durability on two primary fronts: deliberately recruiting staff with an aligned instructional philosophy and building structures to absorb turnover. Part of the answer to long-term sustainability was cultural—a building with a strong shared mission can fold new staff into the work. However, documented structure was generally viewed as equally important. Data-meeting cadences and protocols, Professional Learning Communities with literacy as a standing focus, training expectations that explicitly include support staff and new hires, and establishing new norms for coaching were all cited as elements that keep the system running through staffing changes.

"If it's a system that anyone can do — 'I could do that' — versus 'it's what one person does and now I have to do that,' it just feels weird for teachers. Creating systems that you can plug people into, that sustain themselves, allows the leader to keep the momentum moving." — Teaching and Learning Supervisor, Stillwater

"You get new teachers who maybe have LETRS training, maybe don't, but then the curriculum is totally new to them. That's something we found we really need to work on with our new staff induction." — Instructional Coach, Willow Lane Elementary

Ongoing Challenges

In addition to the many positive reflections on changes to literacy instruction in their schools, staff highlighted several ongoing challenges and areas of risk as they looked toward the future.

Sustaining Funding and Capacity

Across all four schools, staffing was consistently highlighted as a major barrier. Schools described shrinking budgets for interventionists, coaches stretched across buildings, and the loss of supplemental funding streams as challenges for ongoing success. Sustaining READ Act momentum will require treating intervention and coaching capacity as core infrastructure for success.

"Not a lot of schools have interventionists…my teachers are our interventionists. There are students that need more time, but that teacher doesn't have more time. So then you have to figure out 'whose plate do I add to, if their plate's already full, without burning them out?"
— Elementary Principal, Prodeo Academy

Balancing Competing Demands

In part, the schools we interviewed saw success by making literacy a main priority for development. However, several staff expressed some concern about competing priorities. Math standards, curricula, and related demands were in the front of staff's minds as they thought about the future, with many expressing the importance of sustained statewide support and commitment to literacy in the face of balancing other important initiatives.

Complexity Driven by Diverse Learners

Staff across schools were broadly supportive of structured literacy instruction as a pathway to support all learners. They also identified challenges in meeting the needs of students far below grade level as well as multilingual learners. Some students—particularly students in later grades—require differentiation that is difficult to accommodate in core instruction, and with limited resources for supplemental support, the task can feel nearly impossible. Further, multilingual learners often present with deep foundational needs, and research is clear that even after significant code-based skill growth, many continue to struggle with meaning-based skills such as language and comprehension. Staff tied these challenges to limited resources for supplemental support, but also expressed a desire for curricular materials and sequences that create opportunities for differentiation.

"Why aren't our students' speaking skills developing at the level they should be? We think it has something to do with how they're listening and understanding what they're listening to, and then how they're able to produce language. And that's really tricky for us."
— Primary Principal, Prodeo Academy

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About the Author

Peter Nelson is the Principal Consultant and Evaluator at Slate Evaluation. Peter served for eight years as Principal Research Scientist and Vice President of Impact and Innovation at ServeMinnesota, where he led evidence-building and quality improvement for AmeriCorps programs in education, housing, public health, and more. As a former Assistant Professor and researcher at Penn State University, Peter has published over 40 peer-reviewed manuscripts and secured funding from federal and private organizations to help shape guidance for data-based decision-making and evidence building. He leverages his research expertise and applied experience with real-world programming to help non-profit and government agencies strengthen programming by advocating for strong design principles and designing meaningful evaluations.

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