

Literacy Leaders' Position Statement and Recommendations

NCSU Literacy Leaders

June 5, 2024

North Country Supervisory Union Leaders,

As you are aware, Vermont has long been hailed as an educational stronghold, consistently securing a position among the top ten states in the U.S. for its academic excellence. There is much to be proud of, and Vermont's educators, who have established this tradition, deserve considerable accolades. However, in certain circles, there's a growing concern that our esteemed reputation may be faltering. In 2018, Vermont proudly held the 9th position in education according to the U.S. News and World Report (US News, 2018). However, by 2021, our standing had slipped to 15th (US News, 2021). Now, in 2024, we find ourselves at an unprecedented low, ranking 24th in the nation (US News, 2024). Furthermore, in 2024, our high school seniors performed at the 27th position nationwide in SAT scores (Schwartz, 2024). Within our own supervisory union (SU) student performance data from recent Aimsweb assessments points to significant struggles in K-2 with foundational skills. Meanwhile, states traditionally ranking lower in these assessments, such as Louisiana, Alabama, and New Mexico, are experiencing an upward trajectory. Particularly noteworthy is Mississippi's remarkable ascent: despite a history of languishing at the bottom of student performance metrics, it has surged to 5th place nationally in SAT scores over the past two years (World Population Review, 2024).

If these statistics give you pause, rest assured, you are not alone. What lessons can we glean from the experiences of other states to counteract the troubling trends unfolding in Vermont? One compelling answer lies in the thorough examination of decades of research dedicated to unraveling the intricacies of how children acquire essential academic skills, particularly in the realm of literacy. This rigorous research has prompted previously struggling states to revamp their literacy initiatives to align with robust scientific evidence, often referred to as the science of reading (SOR).

It is crucial to understand that the SOR isn't a mere program, theory, or teaching method; rather, it encapsulates the accumulated knowledge of how children engage with language through speaking, reading, and writing. Key insights from this body of research emphasize the significance of early exposure to verbal language and the necessity for explicit, systematic instruction in both word recognition and language comprehension.

As of April this year, thirty-seven states had embarked on or completed the journey of realigning their literacy strategies with the SOR (Education Week, 2024). Many of these states have transparently shared their experiences, documenting successes and setbacks, to facilitate a smoother transition for others. Common recommendations include intensive professional development for educators in the SOR, a phased timeline spanning 2-5 years for researching, piloting, and implementing new literacy programs, and a grace period before substantial student progress becomes evident.

With this wealth of knowledge, we confront the pivotal question: How can we implement superior literacy practices in Vermont to bolster student achievement? Earlier this school year, our dedicated team of literacy leaders undertook the responsibility of thoroughly researching and evaluating new literacy programs to tackle this challenge head-on. Throughout the year, we embarked on a comprehensive exploration of three literacy programs: Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA), Bookworms, and American Reading Company (ARC). Initially, our aim was to lay the groundwork for our elementary schools in the process of adopting a new program.

Our initial process involved addressing two core issues:

1. Would adopting a literacy program better serve our students?
2. Should a single program be implemented across all schools, or should some level of autonomy be preserved by offering a choice of recommended programs?

To the first question, we concluded that adopting a new literacy program would significantly benefit our students. This decision was based on the need for a cohesive approach to language, materials, structure, universal instruction, MTSS instruction, professional development, and data reporting. Additionally, a common program would provide opportunities for enhanced support.

Regarding the second question, we determined that the benefits of a unified approach—such as consistency in instruction and support—would outweigh the advantages of allowing individual schools to choose from multiple programs.

Early on, recognizing the magnitude of this endeavor, we emphasized the necessity of a well-structured timeline to navigate the evolving landscape, including potential team changes and budget constraints. However, unforeseen impediments beyond our control compelled us to streamline our approach, presenting us with the formidable task of making a unified recommendation for all schools within our SU under limited resources, abbreviated piloting, and constrained staff training. Simultaneously, most of us engaged in LETRS professional development, delving into the SOR while assessing programs for their alignment with SOR principles.

After diligent evaluation, we have reached a recommendation. Yet, before finalizing it, we deem it crucial to address lingering concerns.

An early concern lay in the potential consequences of rushing the adoption process and the trepidation that hastening this crucial decision may lead to teacher dissatisfaction, diminished student performance, parental resistance, and a rocky start of the new program. To genuinely support any program, we advocated for a thorough piloting phase across multiple schools,

spanning at least a full year. However, recent updates from the SU, such as using next year as an optional implementation phase, has helped to alleviate some of those fears.

Understanding that student success hinges less on a program than on teacher effectiveness, we emphasize the necessity of prioritizing teacher training prior to the implementation of any new curriculum. Ideally, we envision a minimum one-year period for all elementary educators to complete the foundational LETRS course (or LETRS Early Childhood for preschool teachers). This training is essential for establishing a solid understanding of a new SOR-based curriculum. Without this foundational knowledge, educators may resort to strictly adhering to scripted lessons, rather than possessing the flexibility to adjust content, pacing, and differentiation according to their students' needs. This could heighten frustrations, potentially leading to teacher burnout or early retirements, thereby further straining a system already challenged by staffing shortages.

As experienced educators, we acknowledge the absence of a perfect curriculum. Despite our exhaustive search for a program aligned with SOR principles, we recognize that adaptation will be necessary. Without adequate training, educators will lack the necessary expertise to effectively modify the curriculum, potentially impeding student progress and contributing to discontentment among all stakeholders.

We strongly advocate for comprehensive teacher supports to be established alongside the implementation of new programs. This should include the availability of instructional leaders to assist with implementation, as well as school-based MTSS coaches. These supports are essential to alleviate some of the burdens on teachers.

Additionally, we request that schools be granted the flexibility to develop schedules tailored to the specific needs of the new programs. The two remaining programs under consideration impose significant constraints on classroom schedules. Longer piloting periods would allow for the development of a schedule that best suits each school's unique context, particularly in terms of students' access to highly engaging teacher read-alouds and independent reading. We recommend that principals give significant consideration to feedback from teachers who have piloted the programs when creating the daily schedule.

As dedicated community members within our SU, we recognize the significant pressures associated with budgeting for new programs and the urgency to address community concerns regarding our students' reading performance. However, we urge you, as leaders within our educational community, to carefully consider the potential adverse effects of hastening the adoption process. A rushed implementation could have lasting negative repercussions over the coming years, and we hope you will balance immediate concerns with long-term outcomes for our students and educators.

If after careful consideration you elect to adopt a new literacy program for next school year, we have arrived at a final recommendation. [Here is a document](#) with data and feedback from all teachers who piloted the literacy programs in contention as well as data and feedback from NTS and Coventry who have been implementing Bookworms and CKLA respectively.

To summarize our findings, while both CKLA and Bookworms have strengths and weaknesses, we feel that CKLA will require fewer revisions and supplements. For instance, the writing portion may need some adjustments and supplemental high-interest trade books may be beneficial. However, we believe the foundational skills and knowledge components of CKLA are stronger, and these are the areas we feel should be prioritized to boost overall student achievement. Other criteria included:

1. Rigor of knowledge
2. High levels of student, teacher, and family engagement
3. Explicit, systematic phonics instruction that aligns with LETRS
4. Built in universal design, remediation, and scaffolding
5. Ease of access to grade-level topics
6. Usability for teachers
7. Progressive writing instruction
8. Accessibility to listening comprehension and oral language through online components
9. Comparative ease of scheduling

Therefore, with these considerations in mind, we recommend CKLA.

Thank you for your consideration and your unwavering dedication to our SU.

Sincerely,

NCSU Literacy Leadership Team

References

Schwartz, Sarah (2024, April 29). Which states have passed 'science of reading' laws? What's in them? Education Week, April 2024.

<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/which-states-have-passed-science-of-reading-laws-whats-in-them/2022/07>

U.S. News and World Report (2018). Best States 2018: Ranking Performance Throughout All 50 States. <https://www.usnews.com/media/best-states/overall-rankings-2018.pdf>

U.S. News and World Report (2021). Best States 2021: Ranking Performance Throughout All 50 States. <https://www.usnews.com/media/best-states/overall-rankings-2021.pdf>

U.S. News and World Report (2024). Education.

<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/rankings/education>

World Population Review (2024). SAT Scores by State 2024.

<https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/sat-scores-by-state>