AVRCE Middle Level Literacy

Fall 2025 Newsletter

November 21, 2025

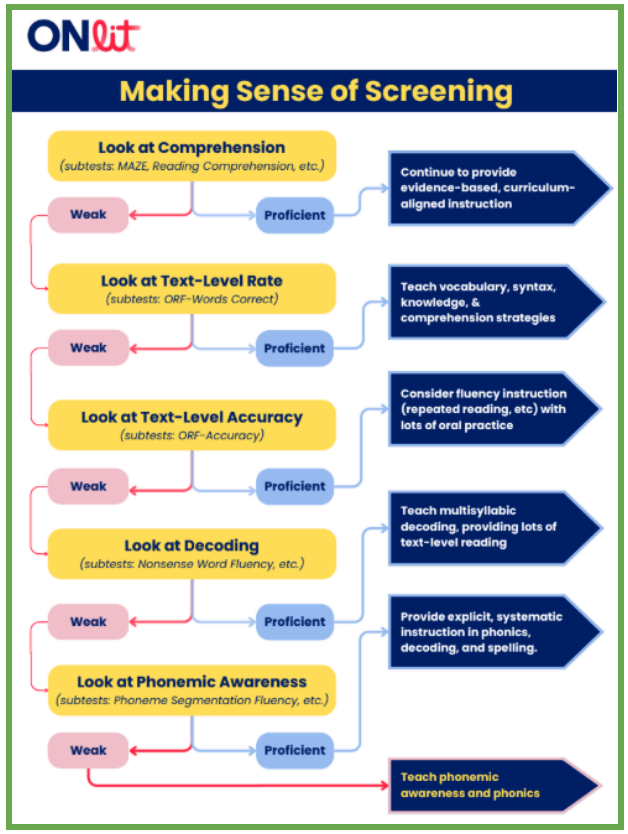


Here we are again, already in report card season of another year! I hope today has given you some valuable time to catch up on the endless stacks of marking that are the perennial plague of ELA teachers everywhere, and even get a jump start on report cards.

The first months of the 2025-2026 year have been BUSY – hence the reason for the first newsletter not arriving until the end of November! – and there continues to be a lot of "new." As the landscape of literacy instruction changes across the region, province, country, and world, we are all finding ourselves learning new terms (e.g. morphology), learning new practices (e.g. *Think*SRSD, fluency workshop), learning new ways of assessment (e.g. CORE Reading Maze, CORE Phonics), and learning new curriculum (Grades P-2, and next year Grades 3-6). I took the photo above of my desk in October. I was in the midst of reading the new Grade 6 curriculum, and planning how I'm going to integrate all the pieces of literacy instruction we've been learning over the last three years – strong Tier 1 instructional practices, screening and diagnostic

assessments, quality read alouds, and Tier 2 vocabulary instruction – into a coherent package. Needless to say, my brain is often feeling a bit mushy at the end of the day. If you feel like your head is spinning just a wee bit, too, we're all right there with you!

As we turn the page on Term 1 and complete report cards, we make an important shift from beginning of the year universal diagnostic assessments to next-step instruction. This newsletter will walk us through this process and guide us through how to support the readers in our classrooms as we begin a new term.



Using a Decision-Making Flowchart for Reading Assessment

The first step in assessing all students at a grade level or across a school is for everyone to be on the same page. This can be challenging when we're all learning! I have found a decision-making flowchart, like the Onlit - Making Sense of Screening Flowchart.pdf to the left, to be an invaluable tool in guiding me through the screening process, and knowing what to do next. Think of this chart like any other scaffold you would give to your students: eventually, you won't need to refer to it anymore, but until then, it's a useful guide through a new process.

In Grades 3-8+, we start at the top of this flowchart and work down. The idea is that *most* of our students should already have mastered phonemic awareness, early phonics/decoding skills, and are becoming increasingly

fluent readers. Obviously, this is not always the case. This flowchart helps us quickly identify those students and begin to support their individual needs.

Assessments

There are three assessments to which I regularly refer. All come from the *Assessing Multiple Measures* book from the CORE Literacy Library that was distributed to LSTs last year.

Assessment	Purpose	Digital Resource
1. CORE Reading Maze	To gain a quick snapshot of a student's overall reading comprehension.	1. CORE Reading Maze Compreh... Dyslexia-Friendly CORE Maze As...
2. MASI-R Oral Reading Fluency	To gain a quick measure of a student's oral reading fluency.	2. CORE MASI-R Fluency Test
3. CORE Phonics Screener	To measure a student's phonics/decoding skills and to pinpoint the location at which those skills may be breaking down (so intervention can begin).	3. CORE Phonics Survey CORE Phonics Survey & UFLI Fou...

These are certainly not the only assessments that measure these skills; however, since most of us have the book available at our schools, they are the assessments I regularly use for the sake of consistency.

Conducting the Assessments

CORE Reading Maze

From Grades 3-8+, we begin our screening at the top of the flowchart by looking at our students' **comprehension.** We do this by conducting the **CORE Reading Maze** assessment. This can be done by a classroom teacher in less than a single period, and is conducted *with the full class, all at the same time.*

The process for the CORE Maze is as follows:

1.	**Pre-teach the assessment.** I use the slides below each time I introduce this assessment, even if students have done it before. Pre-Teaching the CORE Reading Maze Assessment
2.	**Provide the grade level text to your students.** Because this is a universal screener, we are looking to see if students can meet their objective grade level benchmark or not. We are not measuring oral reading comprehension with this assessment, so we are not reading the assessment to our students. We are gauging whether or not students can read words on a page, using their knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, and context to make the correct choices.
3.	**Have students select two colours.** The first colour will be used during the first timed three minutes of the assessment. It is this timeframe which gives us our grade level benchmark. The second colour will be used after the three minutes ends. Students finish the assessment at their own pace in their second colour. While not necessary, this provides useful information about their overall accuracy.
4.	**Tell students to begin and start the timer.** Students work with their first colour for three minutes, reading silently to themselves and selecting the correct answers on the assessment. When three minutes is up, tell students to stop

	and switch to their second colour. They then complete the assessment at their own pace.
5.	**Collect the assessments.** Do not go over the answers with students. This is important if you plan to conduct the screener again in the winter and spring. There are only two passages at each level in the CORE Maze package, so students will repeat Passage A again in the spring.
6.	**Score the assessments.** This is the most time consuming part of the assessment, as is the case with all marking! Still, there is a definite correct answer and incorrect answer, which makes scoring the Maze easier than most other assessments we give out in ELA. When scoring, the answers attempted in the first three minutes will determine whether a student is meeting, strategic (approaching), or intensive (limited). Marking the rest of the assessment gives insight into a student's overall accuracy. See example below.
7.	**Organize results.** This can be done in whatever way makes sense to you and your team. I prefer using Google Sheets and sorting my column from "Z→A" to see where students fall in relation to their benchmark.
8.	**Discuss next steps.** See below!

Oral Reading Fluency Assessments

Whereas the Maze is conducted with an entire class, an Oral Reading Fluency assessment (ORF) is conducted one-on-one with a student. There are a number of different versions of ORF assessments available. I commonly use one of the following:

2. CORE MASI-R Fluency Test	Gate 3: Acadience Oral Reading	3-Minute Reading Assessments

For those who have conducted running records in the past, this will feel very familiar, albeit faster. The student is presented with a text and asked to read the text at their normal rate for one minute. Provide students with any words they do not attempt after three seconds. Note any words the student omits, reads incorrectly, or that you provided as errors. Self-corrections are noted, but not counted as errors. Mark where the student stops at the end of the one minute.

If you are using the Acadience or the 3-Minute Reading Assessments resources, you then read the full text aloud to the student. Ask them to retell as many details as they can remember from the story and assess based on the length, accuracy, and detail of their retell. Comprehensive instructions are included in each of the assessment resources.

CORE Phonics Survey

For students in Grade 3 and up, the CORE Phonics Survey is **only conducted with students who are in the intensive range or below, as determined by their CORE Reading Maze results.** Students are presented with the Student Materials. They begin simply by naming letters, providing letter and vowel sounds, and moving up to multisyllabic word and nonsense word reading.

▸ WHAT IT MEANS This test is a mastery test. It is expected that students will ultimately get all items correct. Score each list completed by student as shown below.

CORE Phonics Survey—English, Mastery

	(Letter Names/Sounds)	(15 Item)	(24 Item)
Benchmark	83 (all)	14+	21+
Strategic	65–82	10–13	15–20
Intensive	0–64	0–9	0–14

The table to the right is taken from the CORE Phonics assessment package, and provides benchmarks for each section of the assessment. This can assist in determining the starting point for **intensive, targeted instruction.** Keep in mind that the phonics and decoding skills assessed on the CORE Phonics survey are foundational skills presumed to be mastered in Grades P-2; if we are conducting a CORE Phonics screener with a middle level student, it is because they are demonstrating concerning gaps in their reading comprehension and fluency, and we are trying to pinpoint the crack in the foundation of their reading development. This is not a routine assessment that needs to be conducted with each student at the middle level.

If this assessment is provided and it is clear that there are gaps in the student's phonics and decoding knowledge, intervention can begin at that point. This CORE Phonics Survey & UFLI Foundations Scope & Sequence Alignment.pdf can help to determine where a student should start. Even if you are not following the UFLI program with your older students, I still find this chart helpful to determine a focus for intervention.

Next Steps in Reading Instruction

Now that the first term has wrapped up and you've had time to complete your initial screeners and gain a clearer picture of how your students are progressing, it's time to consider the instructional next steps that will best support their literacy development. You may be wondering: *What does this look like, and where do we go from here?* I find it helpful to think about the results in the following way:

	Next Steps
Meeting or exceeding benchmark (highlighted in green for meeting, blue for exceeding)	- Continue fluency development - Continue comprehension development - Continue vocabulary/morphology development
Approaching benchmark (highlighted in yellow)	- Fluency practice is likely necessary (see Shared Middle Level Fluency Folder for a growing number of resources) - Multisyllabic word study - Explicit vocabulary/morphology instruction - Continue comprehension development

Significantly below benchmark (highlighted in red)	- Request for TST (these are students who may require Tier 3 intervention) - Further assessments (e.g. 3. CORE Phonics Survey) to determine next steps for instruction - Fluency practice (if able) with appropriate texts - Explicit vocabulary/ morphology instruction - Continue comprehension development (with appropriate adaptations in place)
All students (this becomes particularly important for students who are approaching or significantly below): - Engage in rich, full-class or small group discussions - Provide opportunities to engage with challenging texts and new vocabulary in the context of the unit of study - Teach the use of assistive technology to access information and digital texts	

Another helpful tool in the ongoing assessment of reading are Rasinski and Padak's 3-Minute Reading Assessments , which provide a more comprehensive snapshot of your students' reading.

AI in the Classroom

Whether we like it or not, AI is here to stay! For educators, AI can be a really powerful tool to support differentiated instruction, generate leveled texts for our students, explore unit ideas, and draft writing exemplars. Our students can equally benefit from the features AI has to offer. Let's look at some of the ways AI can be used in the classroom.

Gemini Storybook
Gemini offers access to some really neat features that we can all access through our AVRCE licensing, including the Storybook feature. It is especially great at creating social stories or text on a certain topic or at an appropriate level for your students.

Leveling Texts using AI
Many of you may already be familiar with this feature, but several AI platforms can quickly create leveled texts using the Lexile Levels By Grade. If you're looking to benefit from some of the previously generated texts used for the Reading Fluency Workshop, you can find them on the AVRCE Middle Level Literacy website.

Creating unit and lesson plans
How many hours have you spent on unit and lesson planning? Or, maybe you already have the ideas and just need support creating practice materials or questions. Gemini can support you with developing the big picture of your unit plan down to the bite-sized pieces of your lesson for explicit instruction.

Teaching Digital Literacy
Lastly, and most importantly, as much as AI offers many great opportunities, as educators we have a responsibility to equip our students with the skills they need to be responsible digital citizens. This includes teaching them to critically evaluate online sources, practice responsible AI usage, recognize misinformation, and understand the ethical implication of using AI tools, actively preparing them for the digital world we live in.

Takeaways from October's ResearchED Conference

Research Ed Conference
Recap
October 25, 2025
Saint Mary's University

Ashley and Jenna had the chance to attend this conference in late October alongside other AVRCE teachers, coaches, and coordinators, and we wanted to share a few of the highlights with you!

Amanda VanDerHeyden - The Science of Learning

Amanda is primarily a policy adviser and researcher in math screenering and progress monitoring and, while math is her research focus, we learned a lot from her about the **science of learning and the power of explicit instruction.** She believes that learning happens by design, not by accident, and that through highly effective instruction and modeling, we will see improved results. She talked in detail about the **instructional hierarchy to support student learning** and here is my simplified version.

1. During the **acquisition stage**, we must explicitly model with high quality practice and immediate error correction as our students are gaining new understanding and acquiring new skills.
2. The **fluency stage** is where a student can perform a skill accurately, but not yet quickly, effortlessly, or automatically. At this point, the learner still needs time to think through the steps, and the task requires noticeable mental effort. The goal of this stage is to help the student move from *correct but effortful* to *correct and efficient*.
3. The **generalization/adaptation stage** is the final phase of the Instructional Hierarchy, where students move beyond fluency and demonstrate true mastery of a skill. At this point, they can use the skill flexibly, independently, and in new

or changing situations.
All this information is helpful in choosing the right instructional approach based on a student's instructional level. If this topic interests you, follow the link to her podcast.

Leslie Laud - Teaching Writing using *Think*SRSD

This conference provided an amazing opportunity to see Dr. Leslie Laud talk in person. She is the face of the *Think*SRSD approach to writing, and has worked hard to provide this valuable resource to be widely used for minimal cost. Find more resources on her website.

Nathaniel Hansford - Reading Intervention for Older Students

This session was especially interesting as it provided a ranking of the most **effective literacy strategies for helping struggling older readers**, ranked by effect sizes found by meta-analysis. Within the top four **most effective literacy strategies**, writing strategies, repeated reading, and morphology for spelling were all named, all of which we are working on in AVRCE! Nathaniel also discussed that the most **effective intervention cycle** starts by assessing student deficits, teaching to those needs, re-testing student deficits, adjusting instruction based on data, and repeating as needed to build students' literacy skills. You can check out his slidedeck here.

Save the Date: February PD for Grade 6 Teachers

The Grade 6 curriculum is available now on the provincial curriculum website where you can find it at this link or find it at https://curriculum.novascotia.ca by scrolling down to the bottom of the page and clicking on *Teacher Information*. We are

in the “soft launch” phase of the curriculum this year and you will hear more information soon about **Professional Development being provided in February.**

Make a Request for Your Classroom

This year, the middle level literacy team has grown to two! Ashley has taken a role as Consultant for Literacy (Middle Level/High School) and will be maintaining her schools for coaching at the western end of the region. Jenna Warren has taken on coaching at schools at the eastern end of the region. Our time in schools is primarily driven by **teacher requests**. We will be attempting to spend time in each of our schools over the course of the year and are already booking cycles into the new year! **Any new requests can be sent to Jenna or Ashley using the emails provided below!**

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