

From Policy to Impact

North Carolina's Implementation of the Science of Reading

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Introduction

Over the past decade, many states have embraced the “science of reading,” an interdisciplinary body of research about what works and matters most in teaching students to read.¹ In 2021, North Carolina passed the Excellent Public Schools Act to advance teachers’ understanding and use of science of reading practices,² and the state’s approach has since emerged as an exemplar of policy implementation. As of June 2024, 44,000 pre-K through 5th grade teachers in all 115 North Carolina school districts had completed required training in the science of reading, reaching nearly 700,000 students.³

Recent data suggests the state’s efforts are having a positive impact on students. In each of the three years since the law was enacted, North Carolina’s K-3 students have outperformed the national average on the end-of-year DIBELS-8 assessment, and in 2024 a larger percentage of North Carolina students were rated to be “on track” than the national average in all four grade levels tested.⁴

North Carolina’s approach to implementation is instructive for multiple reasons. In order to successfully reach so many teachers in a short period of time, the state had to navigate a decentralized governance system and build systems-wide support for a major reform following the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, by investing heavily in district capacity and support, state leaders ensured that teachers would not only receive adequate training but also be equipped to apply it in their classroom practice.

This case study highlights three key elements of North Carolina Department of Public Instruction’s (NCDPI’s) implementation of the Excellent Public Schools Act: Internal Policy Alignment, Capacity Building and Resource Allocation, and Stakeholder Communications.

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The elements in this analysis draw on [From Policy to Impact: A State Education Agency’s Guide to Implementation](#), which offers a new framework to help SEA leaders and staff think about policy implementation.

For other examples of high-quality implementation, see [From Policy to Impact: Illinois’ Implementation of High-Impact Tutoring](#) and [From Policy to Impact: Louisiana’s Implementation of High-Quality Instructional Materials](#).

Policy Overview

North Carolina's Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021 built on a decade of activity around reading instruction, shifting over time to a more proactive approach.⁵ Specifically, the law:

- Established a statewide definition of the science of reading.
- Mandated that current pre-K through 5th grade teachers complete the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training, a program that builds educators' fluency in the science of reading through 80 hours of training (for pre-K educators) or 160 hours of training (for K-5 educators).⁶
- Required elementary educator preparation programs to provide coursework and training in the science of reading.
- Tasked the State Board of Education with developing literacy instruction guidance that would establish consistent expectations for instructional practices related to literacy and required NCDPI to provide districts with model implementation plans.
- Required districts to submit annual literacy intervention plans to NCDPI grounded in the science of reading that specified their curriculum and instructional practices — or risk losing access to state literacy intervention funds.
- Required districts to implement individual reading plans aligned to the science of reading for any struggling readers in K-3.
- Tasked NCDPI with developing the Digital Children's Reading Initiative, a website with resources for families to support their children's reading development at home.

Significantly, the law did *not* institute any changes in academic standards or assessments, nor did it mandate the use of any specific curricula.

Implementation Highlights

Internal Policy Alignment

NCDPI used purposeful internal teaming and frequent adjustments to the agency’s organizational chart to strategically **direct resources and expertise to where they would have the most impact** supporting district needs. This began even before the legislation was enacted, when then-State Superintendent Catherine Truitt combined the Offices of Early Learning and Early Literacy into a single department⁷ to better support the state strategic plan’s **integrated pre-K through 5th grade literacy vision**.⁸ In subsequent years, Amy Rhyne, senior director of NCDPI’s Office of Early Learning, also regularly shifted her office’s organizational chart to align with evolving implementation needs. As Kelley Bendheim, NCDPI’s assistant director of early literacy, noted, “Amy [Rhyne] updates the org chart at least once a year, and so we’re really good at shifting. The work doesn’t shift, but we just get the right people in the right spot.”⁹

NCDPI also collaborated closely with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS), which oversees pre-K in the state, to support the rollout and monitoring of the training for pre-K educators.¹⁰ This **systems alignment across state agencies** enabled NCDPI and NCDHHS to share training data and transfer funds across agencies.¹¹ In doing so, they ensured that pre-K teachers had the resources they needed to complete the training — regardless of which sector they worked for — and that agencies were positioned to track necessary data and provide relevant supports for educators.¹²

While the law required that districts submit and receive approval for their literacy plans to receive literacy intervention funds, NCDPI **realigned its internal processes to create more flexibility for districts**. As Bendheim noted, “We wanted [districts] to get funding. If we said ‘not approved,’ they wouldn’t have got[ten] funding, and it’s not right for districts who are still learning.”¹³ Accordingly, NCDPI adjusted its “approve-or-deny” protocol to allow for a verdict of “approved with recommendations.”¹⁴ Combined with an expedited review process, this change allowed districts to submit their plans early and get approval — with feedback — before too much time in the school year had elapsed.¹⁵ NCDPI’s flexibility ensured that districts had plans to implement the necessary changes while mitigating the risks that they would lose out on state funding.

Capacity Building and Resource Allocation

The Excellent Public Schools Act was, notably, a fully funded piece of legislation, investing \$165 million over three years to support implementation.¹⁶ NCDPI capitalized on the opportunity presented by using the ample funding to **organize a pyramid of support** that included agency staff, regional literacy consultants for each of the state’s eight regions, and one literacy specialist in each district.¹⁷ The literacy specialists — new positions funded in the legislature’s 2022 budget session — are employees of NCDPI who work alongside local curriculum teams and serve as the bridge between the state’s literacy resources and district schools. These investments ensured that educators not only learned science of reading practices but also could apply them to their curriculum decisions and instructional practices.

NCDPI also **committed to meeting districts’ unique needs and offering flexibility** to allow for diverse contexts. Bendheim noted, “What was most important for us [was] for districts to feel supported in this heavy lift. ... They saw us walking the walk.”¹⁸ One example of this is the three-year tiered rollout, in which districts were able to select which of the three cohorts they wanted to join. NCDPI staff recognized that some districts were already further along than others and were intentional about leveraging the enthusiasm of early adopters. NCDPI also offered districts the flexibility to move into a later cohort if needed — something especially important given the high rates of district leadership turnover post-COVID. According to Rhyne, NCDPI believed that “there would be increased buy-in if districts were allowed to select which cohort aligned to their specific needs.”¹⁹

NCDPI’s use of “approval with recommendations” for district literacy plans also allowed the agency to adjust for local contexts and constraints, **softening the time and financial pressures in ways that increased educator buy-in**. This was especially helpful for districts that were not scheduled to complete the LETRS training for another year or two, as well as for districts that were unable to quickly change curricula (due to finances or school board governance). For instance, Clinton City schools had purchased a new core curriculum not long before the state legislature passed the science of reading law. After the district’s teachers went through the LETRS training, they realized that their new curriculum was incompatible with the science of reading, but the district had already committed to the purchase.²⁰ NCDPI’s flexibility facilitated transitions that were aligned with each district’s contexts and took into consideration their various starting points.

NCDPI further strengthened the knowledge and capacity of districts by producing hundreds of guidance documents, memos, webinars, and trainings, **crafting a “menu of support” to help districts** solve many of the complex and nitty-gritty implementation challenges they might face.²¹ One NCDPI official stated in an interview, “[Our team] did a really, really nice job of taking a large body of work for districts, breaking it down and giving lots of support. So it wasn’t just ‘here, do it.’ There were supports that came with [implementation].”²² These resources were informed by the insights that NCDPI obtained from early adopters and districts in the first cohort. As Rhyne put it, “We spent a lot of time listening. What are the challenges? And how can we help you problem-solve through those?”²³ Altogether, NCDPI captured and codified lessons, developed tailored solutions to common challenges, and provided consistent guidance.

Stakeholder Communications

When the law was announced, many districts and educators were skeptical of the new mandates, wondering how they would complete the LETRS training, especially after the exhaustion of the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁴ In response, NCDPI **reinforced the urgency of the problem and encouraged districts through positive messages**. For example, when educators would wonder if now was the right time for change, state leaders would point to data showing the long-running struggles of North Carolina’s early readers. As Rhyne recalled, “The question [we heard from districts] was, ‘Why now? Why can’t we wait?’ We responded with a consistent message: ‘Why not now?’”²⁵

NCDPI also **celebrated early adopters**, particularly among those in the first cohort of districts, which were lauded for helping NCDPI learn how to roll out the LETRS training to future cohorts.²⁶ According to Bendheim, “Every time [Rhyne] could get in front of the state board — in front of anyone — [she would say], ‘Stand up, Cohort One! Let’s give them a round of applause! They are paving the way! They are doing the hard work of doing this first and helping us figure out how to do this best.’”²⁷

As part of the celebrations, NCDPI also **created awards to spotlight a school or district in every region of the state** that was doing something exemplary or innovative.²⁸ The constant positivity and highlighting of small wins were critical in creating a feeling of momentum throughout the state, giving districts and schools motivation to continue excelling while dampening opposition from skeptics. When the last remaining teachers completed their LETRS training in summer 2024, Rhyne commemorated the milestone, writing that “teachers are the heroes of the literacy story in North Carolina.”²⁹

Conclusion

North Carolina's success in implementing the Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021 was facilitated by strong internal policy alignment, capacity building and resource allocation, and stakeholder communications. NCDPI successfully rolled out LETRS training to tens of thousands of pre-K through 5th grade educators at a challenging time post-pandemic. State leaders won district buy-in through a flexible and supportive approach, positive messaging about the program, and strategic use of organizational resources. Overall, North Carolina has created a strong foundation for continued improvement in literacy performance and, in doing so, has become a model for other states looking to implement science of reading practices. ✦



Endnotes

- 1 For more, see Kelly Robson Foster et al., *On the Same Page: A Primer on the Science of Reading and Its Future for Policymakers, School Leaders, and Advocates*, Bellwether, January 2024, <https://bellwether.org/publications/on-the-same-page/>.
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- 20 Fofaria, "Science of Reading Implementation."
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- 22 NCDPI official, interview, July 22, 2024.
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- 25 Amy Rhyne, interview, July 25, 2024.
- 26 Kelley Bendheim, interview, July 15, 2024.
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- 28 Ibid.
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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit bellwether.org.

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