



Literacy for All Students: Design Philosophy and Key Design Elements

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Series Overview: The LFAS report series documents the design, partnership development, and initial implementation of a citywide literacy initiative led by SchoolSmartKC. Each report focuses on a different aspect of the initiative, from its origins and design philosophy to its collaboration structure and lessons learned during rollout — offering a thorough view of how Kansas City stakeholders are working together to improve literacy outcomes. The series offers insight to practitioners, funders, and policymakers seeking to understand and replicate evidence-based, locally driven approaches to literacy improvement. **Learn more by reading Bellwether’s [Literacy for All Students](#) series.**

A Case Study on Design

“At our Year 2 Data Summit in February 2023, the question was clear: ‘Now what?’ We all saw the literacy data, barely moving each year, but no one was stepping up with a bold, citywide plan. Data Summit attendees were looking to SchoolSmartKC to take the lead. With at least 290,000 adults in Kansas City not yet literate, we knew we couldn’t wait for someone else to lead. Literacy for All Students was born directly from that moment; it’s how we turned data into action.” —Angelique Nedved, Ed.D., President and CEO, SchoolSmartKC¹

Introduction

Literacy shapes how children learn, think, and engage with the world, and it significantly influences their future success far beyond school. However, 77% of third graders² in Kansas City, Missouri, are not proficient in English language arts (ELA), and at least 290,000 adults in the Greater Kansas City region currently struggle with basic literacy skills.³ These numbers represent more than a learning gap; they signal systemic inequity that limits access to higher education, career opportunities, and economic mobility.⁴

SchoolSmart Kansas City (SchoolSmartKC), a nonprofit dedicated to accelerating student growth and proficiency for Kansas City, Missouri, students, recognized that improving literacy could not be treated as an isolated school-by-school issue or solved by short-term interventions. In 2024, the organization launched LFAS, an ambitious, citywide initiative aimed at unifying Kansas City’s fragmented education landscape under a shared, evidence-based literacy vision. LFAS is not a new curriculum or mandate. It is a coordinated initiative that brings together families, educators, funders, and community partners to ensure every child in Kansas City is proficient in ELA by third grade.

The LFAS initiative reflects SchoolSmartKC’s belief that lasting change comes through community investment and collaboration. Inspired by literacy reform success in Mississippi, the LFAS model’s design intentionally blends

research-backed practices with local innovation, anchoring instruction in the Science of Reading, building leadership capacity through coaching and professional learning, and engaging families and communities as true partners in student success.

This case study explores how LFAS was designed not just to transform how literacy is taught in Kansas City, but also to ensure every student becomes a confident, capable reader.

The Origin of LFAS

Establishing Literacy as a Citywide Priority

Each year, SchoolSmartKC convenes district and charter leaders, funders, educators, and community partners for its annual Data Summit (Summit). Summits provide a space for stakeholders to examine regional education data, identify persistent barriers to student success, and align on priorities for collective action.

At the 2023 Summit, participants reviewed data showing that literacy represented one of Kansas City's most pressing challenges. Only about one in four third graders was proficient in ELA, roughly 290,000 adults at that time struggled with literacy, and achievement gaps by income and race were growing.⁵ The Summit's discussion underscored that these disparities had broad implications not only for the academic success of individual students, but also for the long-term economic mobility and workforce development across the region.

This context created a collective sense of urgency and purpose among families, funders, educators, and community-based organizations. However, Kansas City's educational landscape is complex and historically fragmented. The city's public education system is split among multiple charter networks, traditional districts, and numerous private funders and nonprofits, each pursuing its own improvement efforts. While this diversity brings innovation, it has also led to duplication, competition for resources, and inconsistent implementation of evidence-based practices.

In response, summit participants, led by SchoolSmartKC, called for a coordinated, citywide approach that would align schools, funders, and community partners around a shared vision for improving literacy. From this collective understanding, the LFAS initiative was created in 2024 as a locally led, evidence-based effort to bring more coherence to Kansas City's literacy efforts by integrating instructional improvement, leadership development, and community engagement within a unified framework.

Adapting a Proven Model to a Local Reality

Mississippi's success in raising fourth-grade reading performance from 49th nationally in 2013 to ninth place in 2024 offered a compelling proof point for what is possible when systems align around research-based practices.⁶ In 2013, Mississippi passed the Literacy-Based Promotion Act,⁷ a comprehensive effort rooted in the Science of Reading that emphasized early literacy as the foundation of academic success.⁸ Mississippi's approach focused on policy, funding, professional development, coaching, and accountability, including parental notification,⁹ to ensure all students become proficient readers by third grade.

Inspired by the success of Mississippi's statewide literacy reforms,¹⁰ the LFAS model's design is grounded in the Science of Reading, emphasizing evidence-based practices, sustained coaching, and family partnership. LFAS is also catalyzed by Missouri state legislation that supports evidence-based literacy instruction and funded training for pre-K through Grade 5 teachers in Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS).¹¹ Unlike Mississippi's state-driven model, LFAS' model was co-designed with partners (including parents and educators) to enhance district-charter unification, foster deeper family engagement, and blend philanthropic funding with public resources to build lasting capacity across 40 district and charter elementary schools (Appendix). While Mississippi built coherence through a state mandate, Kansas City built it through voluntary alignment across partners.



“We learned from Mississippi’s success, but our path in Kansas City had to be uniquely our own.”

—Angelique Nedved, Ed.D., President and CEO, SchoolSmartKC¹²

Design Principles: Building With, Not For, Kansas City

Designing LFAS required more than adopting a proven model; it called for adapting evidence-based literacy and implementation practices to reflect Kansas City’s unique context. From the beginning, SchoolSmartKC approached the design process as a collective effort, bringing together educators, funders, and families to shape the work. Instead of launching a packaged initiative, SchoolSmartKC prioritized the use of **1) evidence-based practices, 2) collaboration, and 3) flexibility and continuous learning.**

“LFAS brings [everyones’ work] together in a funnel; everyone doing their own big thing, but [coming] together to collaborate. [This creates] a system specific to schools that are involved, but with the goal of scaling. [This allows] schools to be able to access the resources and programs they need, depending on their context.”

—Community Engagement Partner¹³

The LFAS model has five key strategies: literacy coaching for teachers; high-dosage tutoring for all K-3 students; capacity-building fellowships for school leaders and instructional coaches; family and community engagement focused on literacy; and continuous data collection and evaluation. These strategies are the result of the collaborative work grounded in the LFAS model’s three core design principles.¹⁴

Design Principle 1: Ground Instruction in Evidence-Based Practices

SchoolSmartKC anchored the LFAS design in evidence-based instructional practices aligned to the Science of Reading (Sidebar). By aligning instruction and support both inside and outside the classroom with this evidence base, LFAS aims to strengthen the quality and consistency of teaching through practices proven to be effective. As one literacy coach described it, “[Science of Reading] is the cornerstone of what we are doing, ... an approach based on research proven to work.”¹⁵

SIDEBAR

What Is the Science of Reading?

The Science of Reading is a comprehensive body of interdisciplinary research including “cognitive, communication, developmental, psychological, and neurological sciences” that explains how children learn to read and the most effective ways of teaching.¹⁶ This research shows that reading must be explicitly taught through evidence-based instruction that includes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.¹⁷ The Science of Reading has informed various state policies, teacher training, and curricula nationwide.¹⁸

Literacy Coaching for Teachers: At the heart of LFAS is a belief that great teaching drives great student literacy outcomes, and that every teacher can learn effective teaching strategies. LFAS participating schools receive a dedicated literacy coach whose sole responsibility is to work alongside teachers to bridge professional learning (e.g., LETRS training¹⁹ and other professional development rooted in the Science of Reading) and practice. Coaches work side by side with teachers to model lessons that align with the Science of Reading; conduct classroom visits to provide targeted, real-time feedback on instructional strategies; and facilitate reflection and data use to help

teachers build both confidence and skill in identifying trends and adjusting instruction accordingly. While Missouri supports LETRS training for teachers, Robin Henderson, Ph.D., SchoolSmartKC’s chief program officer, explained, “Having literacy coaches provides real-time, job-embedded feedback that deepens understanding. It’s about building skill, not just compliance.”²⁰ While these coaches are selected by the school leader, employed by the school district, and work in the school building, their salaries are funded through SchoolSmartKC.

High-Dosage Tutoring for Students: LFAS high-dosage tutoring complements classroom teaching, ensuring that every student receives targeted reading support. Students receive a minimum of 20 minutes of tutoring at least three days per week for 28 weeks during the first two years of implementation. After two years of tutoring for all students, tutoring will continue for students who are not proficient in ELA, creating a responsive system rather than a short-term intervention. Some schools use adaptive tutoring platforms, like MindPlay Reading Studio, to reinforce foundational reading skills.²¹ In three schools, part-time tutors have been hired to provide in-person one-on-one tutoring to students who require additional support.

Leadership Development and Capacity Building for School Leaders and Coaches: Sustainable and systemic change requires strong leadership. To ensure alignment of instructional strategies within and across schools, LFAS provides cohort-based leadership development for school leaders and literacy coaches. New Leaders — a national school leadership organization — supports LFAS school leaders and the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) provides support for literacy coaches. Both organizations support leaders and coaches in understanding the Science of Reading and the consistent implementation of evidence-based practices.

The development cohorts are designed to be a support system and a mechanism for instructional alignment within schools and across the district. One of the individual coaches for school leaders noted that principals will be coached “in similar areas to the

literacy coaches on the same cadence, so coach and principal are in sync with coaching and instructional supports.”²² This facilitates instructional cohesion not only within schools but also across the region, ensuring that the nearly one-third of Kansas City’s public school students receive consistent instruction regardless of where they are.²³

Each group meets monthly with its LFAS peer group across schools for facilitated discussion and sharing of best practices. This approach builds capacity and fosters a sense of collective accountability. One participating principal described the shift: “I used to see literacy as something teachers did. Now, I see it as what we do together as leaders.”²⁴ By embedding leadership coaching and professional learning directly into the initiative, LFAS ensures that schools are not just implementing change, but developing the knowledge and habits to sustain it.

Design Principle 2: Collaborate for Lasting Change

Recognizing that they did not have the same on-the-ground expertise of educators, funders, community organizations, and family partners, SchoolSmartKC leaders intentionally leveraged those perspectives to co-create the LFAS model. Through a series of co-design sessions, some Summit participants and other key influencers, including Kymyona Burk, formerly of the Mississippi Department of Education, school staff, parents, and numerous others, played a crucial role in establishing the LFAS strategic priorities and the iterative design process. Together, they identified system misalignments, surfaced shared priorities, and explored how diverse partnerships could support sustainable change across schools with different contexts and capacities.

A key benefit of this collaborative group was the emphasis on shared ownership among educators, community partners, and families. That means making sure families are involved as true partners and equipped with the tools to advocate for their students, and that they also find joy in reading themselves. Partnerships with the Parent Leadership Training Institute and Dreams KC helped schools shift from traditional “parent involvement” to genuine family

partnership, where families learn to advocate for their children, identify engagement barriers, and co-create communication strategies with schools. These partnerships reframe parents as co-educators who are crucial in their children’s success.

This group also emphasized that, in addition to including families, reading should be seen as something to enjoy and not just something required for school. Community partners, including the Kansas City Royals Foundation, helped amplify the initiative through their existing efforts. The Royals Literacy League program, a precursor to LFAS, adds joy and civic pride to literacy efforts. Book drives, family reading nights, and community events made reading visible, celebrated, and shared across the city. Several community partners and school leaders emphasized that kids and families were excited to receive tickets to an MLB game for “literacy night” and for the opportunity to meet a prominent baseball player who talked about the importance of reading.



Design Principle 3: Design for Flexibility and Continuous Learning

Flexibility: LFAS is intentionally designed to flex at the school level. Each school has autonomy to hire its own literacy coach, structure tutoring (whether in-person, online, or hybrid), shape family partnerships, and build a culture of inspiration and joy for student reading. One community partner noted that “there is a beauty in giving schools autonomy to build parts of the infrastructure in the way they want.”²⁵ This flexibility allows schools to adapt the model to their unique contexts, such as promoting existing staff into literacy coach roles, tailoring support for team-teaching structures, and extending services to additional grade levels. For example, one school collaborated with SchoolSmartKC to adapt the program to include fourth graders based on its current curriculum and teaching approach.

“We didn’t want another resource or curriculum program. We didn’t want a temporary commitment. We believe if [funders] are serious, they will provide a four or five year investment.”

—Kansas City Public School Leader²⁶

SchoolSmartKC also designed a building-based buy-in model.²⁷ This “adopt a school” approach provides each participating school with four years of support, giving teachers and leaders time to implement, refine, and build a plan to sustain literacy strategies that work for their students. The goal of this structure is to promote leadership stability, as principals are supported over multiple years to build capacity. This four-year support model underscores the LFAS model’s flexibility and adaptability by giving schools space to test and refine strategies that work best for their students without fear of losing literacy support funding.

Continuous Learning: SchoolSmartKC took an iterative design approach, testing ideas, collecting data and feedback, and refining in real time. The first phase included nine pilot schools — diverse in size, governance, and demographics — that served as “learning laboratories.” Through continuous feedback to SchoolSmartKC and partners, these schools, educators, leaders, and influencers helped strengthen the LFAS model’s design. They affirmed core nonnegotiables — such as Science-of-Reading-aligned instruction, tutoring, and embedded literacy coaches — and underscored the need for flexibility and school choice in elements such as tutoring model and parent engagement strategies.²⁸

Data are the threads that connect the LFAS ecosystem. Partnering with UMKC’s Urban Education Research Center (UERC), SchoolSmartKC developed a strong framework for continuous improvement and evaluation to make sure that progress is measured, understood, and acted upon in real time. Data reviews are collaborative, not punitive. School leaders, coaches, and funders meet regularly to analyze trends, celebrate progress, and identify new areas for support. Ongoing research provides the results SchoolSmartKC believes will attract other LFAS funders to support additional schools. Ongoing data collection tracks student progress, and while there were challenges in Year 1 of implementation, anecdotal evidence suggests that some gains were made by students this year. A review of student formative assessments by the LFAS evaluation partner, UERC, indicates that in the 2024-25 school year, 40% of students in the nine pilot LFAS schools met their spring growth target, and 42% of students in schools with full implementation of LFAS met their spring growth target.²⁹

“SchoolSmartKC is known for data — they’re truth tellers. But they use data to build, not to blame.”

—SchoolSmartKC Community Partner³⁰

Codifying Expectations and Clarifying Roles: The Importance of Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs)

In the LFAS initiative, MOUs became an essential tool for building trust, clarifying expectations, and sustaining consistency across schools and partners. SchoolSmartKC introduced MOUs early in the process to formalize commitments from schools and funders before funds were distributed. This step was especially important for charter schools, whose boards required clear documentation to approve new roles or resource allocations.

Each MOU served as a symbol of shared ownership: It outlined roles, responsibilities, and nonnegotiables such as ensuring that literacy coaches were dedicated exclusively to literacy instruction, that all K-3 students would benefit from supports, and that coaching positions were funded at an agreed-upon level. By codifying these details, MOUs reduced ambiguity, supported operational alignment, and helped schools and funders navigate challenges. As Henderson, SchoolSmartKC's chief program officer, noted, when questions arose, partners could "point back to the MOU" to guide decisions and keep implementation on track.³¹ In practice, the MOU transformed potentially complex negotiations into straightforward implementation. In doing so, MOUs helped translate collaboration into sustained action, which provides both a structural and a relational foundation for the LFAS model's success.

Design: Challenges and Lessons Learned

Designing scalable educational interventions requires attention to both technical and social dimensions, including challenges that arise. The LFAS model's design requires aligning interventions with context and building sustainability in people, programs, and funding. This design approach offers several lessons for other cities, regions, or states seeking to build collaborative, inclusive participation for a literacy initiative.

Build from evidence-based models but adapt to context by using co-design and data-driven improvement strategies.

A central design tension for LFAS is balancing evidence-based nonnegotiable elements with school flexibility. Too much autonomy risks diluting impact, while too much rigidity can create resistance from some schools that value ownership of their literacy work. Ideally, schools feel empowered to adapt the model to their context; however, some school leaders viewed LFAS as overlapping or overshadowing their existing literacy efforts. And as schools select tutoring



strategies and parent engagement approaches, providing oversight and alignment across various provider organizations could become challenging for SchoolSmartKC. The organization worked closely with schools and partners to understand where the model was working, where it could be improved, and which elements benefit most from being tailored at the school level without compromising quality. This iterative, collaborative approach increased buy-in, supported contextual relevance, and preserved fidelity to research-based practices.

Truly collaborative initiatives rely on distributed leadership, strong communication, and trust-based relationships that are codified and sustainable.

The LFAS model's success is deeply rooted in the collaborative ecosystem cultivated by SchoolSmartKC. The organization's ability to convene diverse stakeholders and the leadership of its president and CEO and chief program officer, in particular, have been central to building trust, fostering alignment, and guiding the LFAS model's iterative design. However, as the initiative expands, sustaining this collaboration will require codifying the structures and practices that make it work. SchoolSmartKC's leaders have been the connective force driving coherence across schools, funders, and community partners, but long-term success depends on shared leadership and accountability so collaboration thrives even when they are not in the room.

Maintaining the program's impact will require building distributed leadership and institutionalizing communication systems, so collaboration continues even when key leaders are not present. By embedding these practices into the LFAS model's infrastructure, SchoolSmartKC can ensure that the collaborative spirit endures and continues to scale.

A well-designed MOU can serve as both an accountability tool and a partnership-building framework when developed collaboratively.

The development of the LFAS model's MOU surfaced important questions about how to balance accountability, flexibility, and shared ownership across

partners. The MOU was designed to clarify roles, expectations, and commitments. The challenge was to also create an MOU that reinforced fidelity and mutual accountability without discouraging participation or stifling innovation at the school level.

By engaging partners in co-developing and refining the MOU, SchoolSmartKC transformed it from a compliance document into a shared road map for implementation. The process clarified expectations, strengthened mutual trust, and reinforced a sense of shared purpose. Future iterations of the LFAS model's MOU can further embed adaptability, allowing for data-informed adjustments while maintaining collective standards of practice and accountability.

Conclusion

The LFAS model's design demonstrates how a localized, data-informed, and equity-centered approach can mobilize cross-sector partners to address systemic literacy challenges. Grounded in the Science of Reading and informed by lessons from the Mississippi model, LFAS represents a strategic adaptation designed to meet the unique needs of Kansas City's schools and communities. By integrating evidence-based instructional support, student tutoring, leadership development, family and community engagement, and rigorous data accountability, LFAS has established a coherent framework for improving literacy outcomes across both district and charter schools.

The initiative's design underscores the importance of context-specific implementation in education reform. LFAS advances a model in which local leadership, school autonomy, and long-term funding operate in concert with nonnegotiable, research-based practices. As LFAS moves forward, its continued success will depend on sustaining leadership capacity, ensuring funding stability, and maintaining fidelity to evidence-based components while allowing for adaptive growth. The initiative offers a promising example for other communities seeking to translate state-level literacy reform into actionable, citywide strategies designed for long-term impact and to meet all students' needs. ✦

Appendix

LFAS' MODEL FOR SUCCESS

Instructional Coach	Instructional Coach Fellowship	KCPES K-3 Students	Building/District Leadership	Parent- and Literacy-Facing Organizations	Community Support	SchoolSmartKC Quality Assurance
<p>Providing more personalized support to classroom teachers, coaching improves the classroom instruction students receive and can ultimately ensure more students are taught by effective teachers and benefit from a high-quality education.</p>	<p>This two-year fellowship supports coach development. Each coach will earn graduate credits through this fellowship learning model. Throughout the fellowship, coaches will gain increased knowledge and skills to address schoolwide literacy needs.</p>	<p>High-impact tutoring yields strong gains. A blended model (online and in person) complements classroom instruction ensuring every K-3 KCPES student has literacy support across the entire school year. Tutors will be recruited, trained, and compensated.</p>	<p>Building leaders are the second-most important factor in student success. They secure resources, hire staff, and remove barriers. Through a two-year fellowship, leaders will participate in monthly sessions building their capacity to design a system in which literacy thrives.</p>	<p>This funding will invest in LFAS' multiple parent and literacy organizations to support, upskill and build the capacity of families to be tutors and more informed literacy partners in the home. Parents and families are some of LFAS' greatest partners in supporting Kansas City students.</p>	<p>In promoting communitywide support for LFAS' literacy plan, sharing the plan's mission builds a coalition of literacy supporters. A communitywide lift leverages the assets of LFAS' committed business partners, reinforcing a citywide initiative and commitment to quality for Kansas City students.</p>	<p>SchoolSmartKC is dedicated to quality assurance throughout this initiative and conducting due diligence of partnering organizations, including onsite visits, leadership check-ins, progress monitoring, and data collection for LFAS research partnerships.</p>

POLICY to PRACTICE is the key. Missouri has adopted 14 of 18 Early Literacy Fundamental Principles.

Note: The yellow "stars" indicate similar strategies to Mississippi's model. **Source:** Re-created from SchoolSmartKC et al., "Data for Action Summit: Kansas City Public Education System," Slide 52, June 2025.

LFAS' ADAPTATION OF THE MISSISSIPPI LITERACY STRATEGY

Mississippi's System-Level Strategy	Kansas City's LFAS Adaptation
<p>State-Funded Literacy-Based Promotion Act (2013) With Legislative Accountability³²</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locally coordinated initiative anchored by SchoolSmartKC and powered by Kansas City-based philanthropy. • Missouri has policy requiring evidence-based reading instruction.³³
<p>Statewide Network of Literacy Coaches</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missouri offers literacy coaching for teachers through its Regional Professional Development Center.³⁴ • Building-based literacy coaches are funded through LFAS for direct, job-embedded teacher support.
<p>State Department of Education Leadership and Oversight</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SchoolSmartKC serves as a neutral convener and backbone organization to align districts, charters, funders, and community partners and provide quality assurance.
<p>Mandatory Statewide Training in the Science of Reading (e.g., LETRS)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locally implemented professional development and LETRS-aligned training for participating schools. • Missouri pays for pre-K through Grade 5 teachers to attend LETRS training,³⁵ and LFAS teachers are making use of this policy.
<p>State Accountability and Retention Policies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locally designed continuous improvement systems focus on growth and data transparency rather than mandated retention.
<p>Sustained Public Investment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A four-year funding model leveraging philanthropy, local ownership, and long-term sustainability planning.
<p>Parent Notification for Students With Reading Deficiencies, Including Individual Reading Plans</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SchoolSmartKC parent notification for students with reading deficiencies, including individual reading plans. • LFAS is designed to encourage and empower parents as partners in support of reading.

LFAS' INFLUENCERS

Name/Organization	Literacy Contribution
David Hurford	Executive Director of The Center for Reading; expert in tutoring-based literacy curriculum and research.
Trinity Davis	Former teacher, coach, district leader and founder of Teachers Like Me, contributing research-informed perspectives on instruction and talent development.
Jennifer Collier	District Superintendent with experience in system-level literacy leadership.
KCPS and Charter School Staff	K-3 practitioners, including educators and coaches, with 3 to 20 years of classroom literacy experience.
Parent Support Organizations	Community partners offering family perspectives to inform literacy design via parent focus groups.
Phalen Leadership Academies	Designed instructional programming for 26 charter schools serving approximately 10,000 students.
Kymyona Burk (formerly of the Mississippi Department of Education)	State literacy leader and expert in literacy policy implementation, high-dosage tutoring, and professional development.
City University of New York (CUNY)	Institution of higher education that operates the CUNY Reading Corps, placing paid literacy tutors in public schools.
Literacy Partners of Kansas City	City-based adult and family literacy programming.
Heather Knight and Travis Plume (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education — College and Career Readiness)	Missouri education office overseeing statewide literacy training initiatives, including LETRS and Missouri Read, Lead, Exceed.
Karin Chang (UMKC's UERC)	Early literacy research and evaluation expertise.
Oakland REACH	Parent-powered Literacy Liberators model supporting family literacy leadership.

Source: List of influencers provided by SchoolSmartKC.

Endnotes

- 1 Interview with Angelique Nedved, SchoolSmartKC, August 2025.
- 2 Based on 2024 KCPES (combining KCPES and charters) data with 15% proficient and 8% advanced. “Data for Action Summit: Kansas City Public Education System,” SchoolSmartKC et al., presentation, June 2025, slide 35, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1q2SYRNVXeFEiULWx1YfXO44oyG8sFkUl/view?usp=drive_link.
- 3 The authors estimated the number of adults with low literacy in the Kansas City bi-state region using federal survey data and census population counts. First, authors defined the region as 15 counties identified by the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce (“About,” Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, <https://www.kcchamber.com/about/>): the Missouri counties of Bates, Caldwell, Cass, Clay, Jackson, Lafayette, Platte, and Ray, and the Kansas counties of Douglas, Franklin, Johnson, Leavenworth, Linn, Miami, and Wyandotte. For each county, authors used the National Center for Education Statistics’ Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Skills Map (*Comparison Charts of State and County Estimates: Missouri* [Institute of Education Sciences], <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/src/PDF/Missouri.pdf>, pages 8–10, and *Comparison Charts of State and County Estimates: Kansas* [Institute of Education Sciences], <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/src/PDF/Kansas.pdf>, pages 7–8) to find the percentage of adults ages 16–74 with very low literacy (at or below “Level 1”). Authors then used the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (“Census Reporter Profile Page for Kansas City, MO-KS Metro Area,” *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates*, U.S. Census Bureau, 2023, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/31000US28140-kansas-city-mo-ks-metro-area/>) to obtain the number of residents ages 18 and over in each county. To estimate how many adults have low literacy in each county, authors multiplied the PIAAC percentage by the county’s adult population. Finally, authors added the county estimates together to get a total for the 15-county region and divided by the total adult population to calculate a metro-wide percentage. Note that the PIAAC data are 2012–2017, and the ACS data are 2023, and the age groups do not perfectly align. Because these estimates are based on survey data and statistical modeling rather than a full head count, the results should be interpreted as approximate (a best estimate and order of magnitude), not as an exact number of individuals.
- 4 See, for example: 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), slide 7, <https://bellwether.org/publications/on-the-same-page/>; “Examining the Link Between Poor Literacy Skills and Dropout,” Lexia Learning, July 17, 2019, <https://www.lexialearning.com/blog/examining-link-between-poor-literacy-skills-and-dropout/>; Mark Vineis, “Future of Work: Building a Stronger Workforce Through Literacy,” ProLiteracy, June 26, 2024, para. 3, <https://www.proliteracy.org/news/future-of-work-building-a-stronger-workforce-through-literacy/>; Anita Sands, Sarah Cacicio, and Cheryl Lavigne, “Building a Resilient Workforce: The Critical Role of Foundational Literacy Skills,” All In: The Adult Literacy & Learning Impact Network, <https://allinliteracy.org/building-a-resilient-workforce-the-critical-role-of-foundational-literacy-skills/>.
- 5 Interview with Angelique Nedved, SchoolSmartKC, August 2025; see also Endnote Nos. 2 and 3.
- 6 *Mississippi’s 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress* (Mississippi Department of Education, 2025), <https://mdek12.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/2025/01/NAEPRankings-OnePager-2025-0115-JC-v02.pdf>.
- 7 “Literacy-Based Promotion Act,” Mississippi Department of Education, <https://mdek12.org/literacy/lbpa/>.
- 8 Miss. Code §§ 37-177-1 to 37-177-21 (2024), <https://law.justia.com/codes/mississippi/title-37/chapter-177/>. These successful outcomes are often referred to collectively (with other states such as Tennessee and Louisiana) as the “southern surge” and, as pertains to Mississippi, “the Mississippi Miracle.” Educators and school leaders in Mississippi and other states would note that these improvements are not miraculous, but rather the result of a collective impact approach that includes state policy, high-quality instruction and instructional materials, additional student supports, and improved training and coaching of educators. See, for example: “How State and Federal R&D Investments Helped Make the ‘Mississippi Miracle’ Possible,” *Success Stories: Federal R&D Investment at Work*, Alliance for Learning Innovation, para. 1–4, <https://www.alicoalition.org/success-story/how-state-and-federal-rd-investments-helped-make-the-mississippi-miracle-possible/>; Hannah Schmid, “How Mississippi Ended Its Worst-in-the-Nation Early Literacy Epidemic,” *Illinois Policy*, September 27, 2024, “Illinois can learn from the ‘Mississippi miracle’” section, para. 1, <https://www.illinoispolicy.org/how-mississippi-ended-its-worst-in-the-nation-early-literacy-epidemic/>; Kunjan Narechania, “What’s Behind the Southern Surge?,” *Fordham Institute*, May 30, 2025, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/whats-behind-southern-surge>.
- 9 Trudy Hensley, Sheryl Turner, and Joshua A. Melton, *Mississippi’s Literacy-Based Promotion Act: An Inside Look* (ExcelinEd, 2019), 1, <https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ExcelinEd.MSGatewaytoSuccess.March2019.pdf>.
- 10 Kymyona Burk and Kristen Wynn, “State Spotlight: Mississippi Identifies the State’s First Emerging Science of Reading Elementary Schools,” *Education Space* (blog), ExcelinEd, September 28, 2021, para. 3, <https://excelined.org/2021/09/28/state-spotlight-mississippi-identifies-the-states-first-emerging-science-of-reading-elementary-schools/>.
- 11 Mo. Rev. Stat. § 170.014 (2025), <https://revisor.mo.gov/main/OneSection.aspx?section=170.014&bid=57301>; “DESE’s Literacy Initiatives & Efforts: Missouri Read, Lead, Exceed,” Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, <https://dese.mo.gov/college-career-readiness/literacy>.
- 12 Interview with Angelique Nedved, SchoolSmartKC, September 2025.
- 13 Interview with LFAS community partner, August 2025.
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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that works to transform education to ensure young people — especially those furthest from opportunity — achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we help mission-driven partners accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and bring leaders together to drive change on education's most pressing challenges. For more, visit bellwether.org.

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