



Literacy for All Students

*A Citywide Initiative to Build Better Readers
in Kansas City, Missouri*

By Lynne Wells Graziano, Jessica Slaton,
Daniela Torre Gibney, and Titilayo Tinubu Ali

FEBRUARY 2026 (*Correction*)

Note: An earlier version of this analysis misidentified the William T. Kemper Foundation –
Commerce Bank, Trustee, as the Kemper Foundation. The error has been corrected.





| CONTENTS

- 3 SERIES OVERVIEW
- 4 WHY LITERACY MATTERS
- 5 LITERACY FOR ALL STUDENTS IS A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT ANCHORED IN EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES
- 6 LFAS BUILDS ON RESEARCH AND PRIOR POLICY SUCCESS
- 8 LFAS ADVANCES A CITYWIDE FRAMEWORK FOR LITERACY
 - Design
 - Partnerships
 - Implementation
- 13 LESSONS LEARNED DURING THE LAUNCH OF LFAS
- 14 CONCLUSION
- 15 APPENDIX
- 16 ENDNOTES
- 18 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
 - ABOUT THE AUTHORS
 - ABOUT BELLWETHER

Series Overview

Across the United States, literacy has become a national priority, and Kansas City, Missouri, is no exception. The city faces a literacy crisis that mirrors challenges seen across the country. Seventy-seven percent of Kansas City's third graders are not proficient in English language arts (ELA),¹ and at least 290,000 adults in the Greater Kansas City region currently struggle with basic literacy skills.² This challenge disproportionately impacts students from low-income families and students of color, reflecting not just an achievement gap but also an underlying opportunity and access gap that restrict students' future success.³

What Is Literacy for All Students (LFAS)?

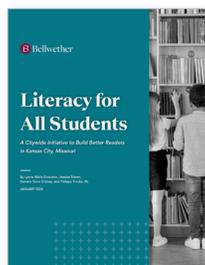
In response to this challenge, educators and community leaders across Kansas City engaged in deeper conversations about the persistent challenges in early literacy achievement. These discussions highlighted the need for a more coordinated and sustained approach across schools and organizations. To address this challenge, SchoolSmart Kansas City (SchoolSmartKC) — a nonprofit dedicated to accelerating student growth and proficiency for Kansas City students — took the lead in developing the LFAS initiative in 2024. Building on Mississippi's decade of statewide literacy reforms and improved reading outcomes,⁴ SchoolSmartKC designed LFAS as a citywide initiative that combined the coherence of Mississippi's model with the power of its local leadership and collaboration.

About This Series

The LFAS series documents the design, 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 insights for practitioners, funders, and policymakers seeking to understand and replicate evidence-based, locally driven approaches to literacy improvement in their communities.**

Navigating the Series

Readers can explore each report individually to examine a specific aspect of LFAS, or review the full set to understand how design, partnerships, and implementation interconnect to form a cohesive, citywide approach to improving literacy outcomes. **Learn more by reading Bellwether's [Literacy for All Students](#) series.**



Summary Report

An overview of the LFAS initiative, including its origins, theory of change, and first-year partnerships and implementation.



Partnerships

A case study describing how SchoolSmartKC collaborated with educators, funders, community organizations, and families to co-create the LFAS model.



Design

A case study outlining the LFAS model's design and core components, grounded in evidence-based instructional practices, collaboration, and adaptability to support continuous improvement and local relevance.



Implementation

A case study examining how the LFAS model's design translated into practice, highlighting key levers, early outcomes, and lessons learned.

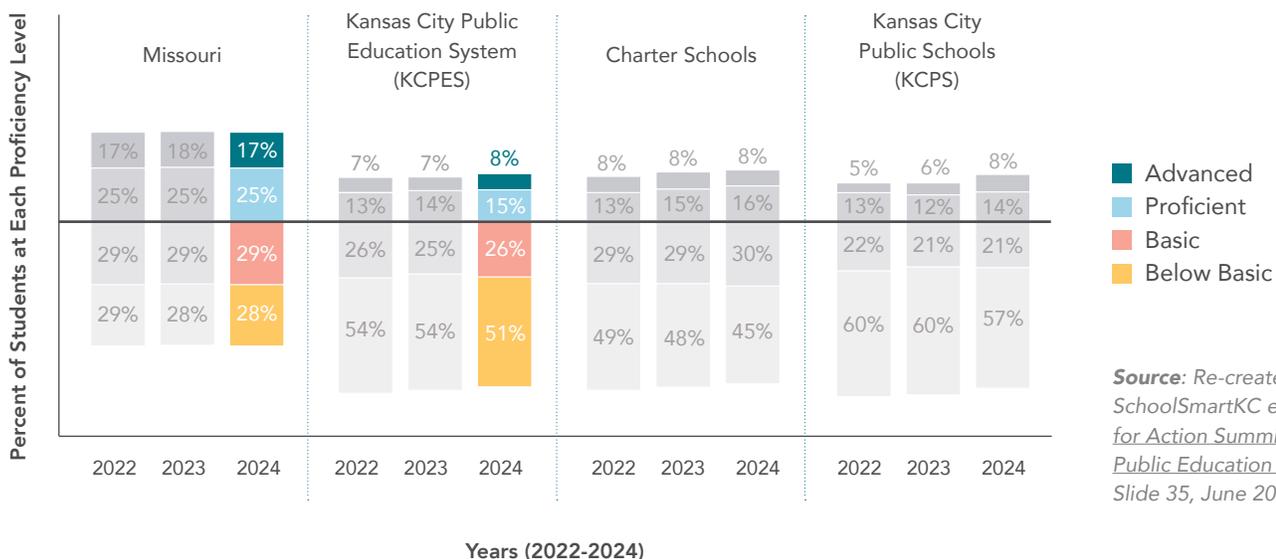
Why Literacy Matters

Literacy is the gateway to all learning. Students who read on grade level by third grade are far more likely to graduate high school, attend college, and access well-paid jobs.⁵ Strong literacy skills benefit not just individuals but also the community, improving economic mobility, civic engagement, and health outcomes.⁶ Lower literacy rates correlate with higher unemployment, lower incomes, and decreased global competitiveness.⁷ Nationally, 54% of United States adults read below a sixth-grade level, and about one in five adults reads below a third-grade level.⁸ At least 290,000 adults in the Greater Kansas City region currently struggle with basic literacy skills — enough people to fill the local Kansas City Chiefs’ NFL stadium nearly four times.⁹ Without improvement at the elementary school level, this number is not likely to decrease, underscoring the need for targeted interventions at the K-3 level, where they may be most effective.¹⁰

In Kansas City, Missouri, only 23% of public school students are proficient in ELA, compared with 43% statewide (Figure 1).¹¹ This means approximately 1,700 students¹² start upper elementary school below expectations each year, potentially contributing to lower graduation rates, lower incomes, and a smaller qualified workforce. Intervening early is not only more effective for improving student outcomes but also a more cost-effective strategy for schools and families to address these barriers.¹³

SchoolSmartKC, a nonprofit dedicated to accelerating student growth and proficiency for Kansas City students, recognized that systematically improving literacy across the region 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 coordination framework that brings together educators, funders, and community partners to support a shared vision that every child in Kansas City is proficient in ELA by third grade. To achieve that vision, LFAS aims to provide literacy training and support to educators and intensive tutoring to students across all 40 district and charter elementary schools in Kansas City. This report provides an overview of the LFAS initiative and how the Kansas City community is working collectively to strengthen student literacy outcomes through evidence-based strategies and aligned action.

FIGURE 1: ELA PROFICIENCY, MISSOURI ASSESSMENT PROGRAM, GRADE 3



Source: Re-created from SchoolSmartKC et al., “Data for Action Summit: Kansas City Public Education System,” Slide 35, June 2025.

LFAS Is a Collaborative Effort Anchored in Evidence-Based Practices

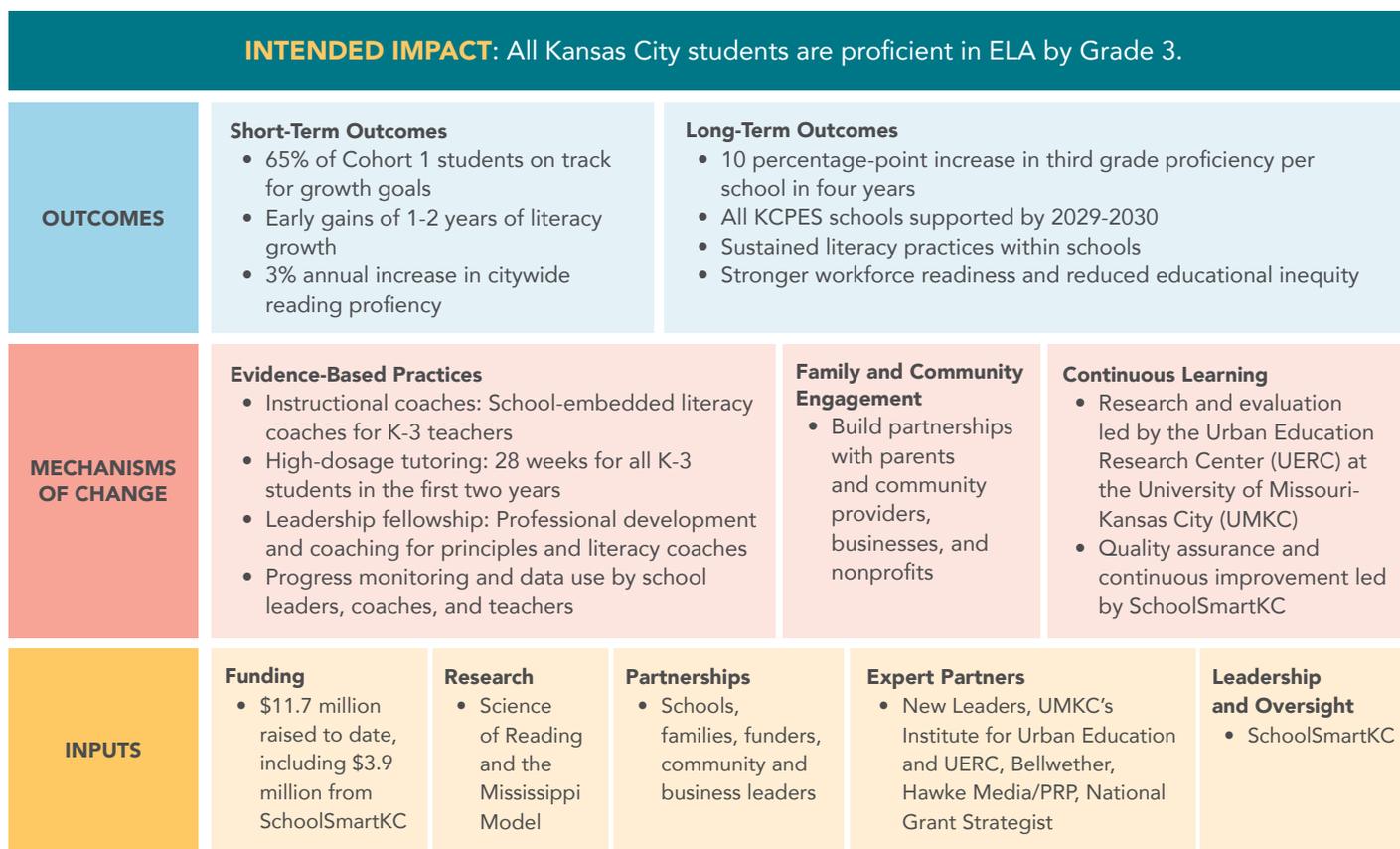
Each year, SchoolSmartKC hosts the Data Summit (Summit), bringing together district and charter leaders, funders, educators, families, and community partners to analyze education data and align on shared priorities. At the 2023 Summit, participants identified literacy as one of the region's most pressing challenges, noting persistent gaps in reading achievement and access to high-quality instruction. Recognizing that these disparities affect both academic outcomes and the region's long-term economic vitality, participants called for a unified response. Given Kansas City's historically fragmented education landscape, which spans multiple districts, charter networks, nonprofits, and funders, the 2023 Summit catalyzed greater coordination across these systems. This collaborative momentum led to the creation of the LFAS initiative, a locally led, evidence-based effort to align instructional improvement, leadership development, and community engagement under a shared citywide vision for literacy.

The LFAS initiative supports and aligns with Missouri-mandated instructional practices¹⁴ rooted in the Science of Reading. The core components of the model include:

- Full-time literacy-focused **instructional coaches** embedded in each school to support teachers.
- A cohort-based **leadership fellowship** to provide coaching and collaborative learning for school-level leaders and literacy coaches.
- **High-dosage tutoring** to address the individual literacy needs of all students.
- **Support for and engagement with families** and community partners.
- **Continuous data collection and evaluation** to assess the initiative and support continuous improvement.

The LFAS theory of change outlines how coordinated investment from philanthropic partners, evidence-based practices, and cross-sector partnerships will drive sustained literacy improvement in Kansas City (Figure 2). Anchored by SchoolSmartKC's leadership and more than \$11 million in funding, the initiative has established a shared literacy infrastructure across schools, strengthened educator capacity, and created transparent systems for tracking progress. In the short term, LFAS aims for measurable gains in literacy and increased proficiency rates. By 2030, the initiative seeks to expand support to all elementary schools.

FIGURE 2: LITERACY FOR ALL STUDENTS' THEORY OF CHANGE



Source: Visually adapted from the UMKC's UERC. SchoolSmartKC, "Literacy For All Students (LFAS) — Theory of Change."

LFAS Builds on Research and Prior Policy Success

The Evidence Base: Science of Reading

Across the country, state policymakers, schools, districts, education leaders, and advocates have refocused attention on literacy instruction based on the Science of Reading, an evidence-based body of research on how children learn to read that emphasizes systematic, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.¹⁵ Decades of research have shown this is the most effective way to teach kids how to read,¹⁶ and at least 40 states have adopted policies to support practices aligned with the Science of Reading.¹⁷

Depending on the state, these policies include adopting evidence-based instructional practices, banning or limiting ineffective practices, providing teacher training and retraining, coaching instructional staff, offering high-dosage tutoring to students, and enforcing retention policies that require students to demonstrate reading proficiency before being promoted to the next grade level.¹⁸ In 2022, Missouri passed the Reading Instruction Act, supporting the Science of Reading¹⁹ and funding educator training in Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS), a program that provides pre-K through Grade 5 teachers with evidence-based literacy instruction tools.²⁰

Learning From Mississippi

Mississippi achieved significant gains in reading through a statewide approach to improving instructional practices and materials. The foundation of this improvement was the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, which was initially passed in 2013.²¹ Key components of the act include professional development of K-3 teachers, identification and support for struggling K-3 readers, and the retention of third-grade students who do not pass reading assessments (with certain exceptions).²² It also requires universal screening for reading disabilities and communication to parents regarding student progress and the retention policy.

Within a decade, Mississippi fourth-grade students moved from a 2013 national ranking of 49th in reading to ninth place in 2024.²³ This was not a “miracle” as often described, but the result of good policy, coordinated funding, strong leadership, effective implementation, and teacher effort.

LFAS Adapts Mississippi’s Model for Kansas City

Inspired by the success of Mississippi’s statewide literacy reforms, the LFAS model is grounded in the Science of Reading and emphasizes evidence-based instructional practices, sustained coaching, and family partnership. LFAS is also catalyzed by Missouri legislation that supports evidence-based literacy instruction and funds LETRS training for pre-K through Grade 5 teachers.²⁴

Unlike Mississippi’s state-driven model, the LFAS model was co-designed with partners (including parents and educators) to strengthen district-charter collaboration, deepen family engagement, and blend philanthropic investment with public resources. This design aims to build lasting capacity across 40 district and charter elementary schools. Specifically, SchoolSmartKC convenes and continues to expand a coalition of more than a dozen external and community partners, including the Mississippi Department of Education, local education field leaders, KCPES²⁵ teachers and staff, national education sector thought leaders, and local partners such as the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and UMKC. School leaders provided input on coaching, scheduling,

and tutoring components while parents joined the Citywide Literacy Advisory Council (Advisory Council) to guide implementation and communication efforts. While Mississippi built coherence through a statewide mandate, Kansas City is building coherence through voluntary alignment among local partners supported by state policy and funding (Appendix).

To ensure coherent implementation of LFAS, SchoolSmartKC serves as a catalyst, convener, and coordinator, aligning funders, partners, and schools. LFAS leverages local relationships, deep knowledge of community needs, and shared accountability to drive long-term change.²⁶ Alongside its role in relationship building, SchoolSmartKC provides quality assurance by establishing clear expectations, supporting implementation fidelity, and monitoring outcomes to ensure interventions achieve the intended impact.



LFAS Advances a Citywide Framework for Literacy

This summary report consolidates key findings from three complementary case studies that examine how SchoolSmartKC co-created and implemented LFAS in collaboration with local partners as a citywide framework for enhancing early literacy outcomes in Kansas City, Missouri. The synthesis focuses on three interconnected areas that shaped LFAS' early progress:

- **Design:** How SchoolSmartKC and its partners developed an evidence-based, flexible model responsive to local needs.
- **Partnerships:** How diverse groups, including schools, funders, families, and community organizations, worked together to create shared ownership and alignment.
- **Implementation:** How schools and partners translated the LFAS model into practice and lessons learned from the first year of work.

For a more detailed examination of each area, see Bellwether's [Literacy for All Students](#) case study series that accompany this report.

Design

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. SchoolSmartKC prioritized co-design, iterative development, and continuous learning cycles to ensure that each element, from coaching to community engagement, was grounded in both evidence-based practices and local experience. The design philosophy was built on three principles: evidence-based practices, collaboration, and flexibility and continuous learning.

Evidence-Based Practices: The LFAS instructional approach is anchored in the Science of Reading, emphasizing explicit and systematic instruction in

phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. By design, LFAS will provide each participating school with a full-time literacy coach, high-dosage tutoring for K-3 students, and professional learning for school leaders and literacy coaches through LFAS cohort fellowships. Together, these elements establish a coherent structure aimed at improving literacy across multiple levels of participating school systems.

Collaboration: A collaborative design process was central to the LFAS model's development. SchoolSmartKC leveraged its leadership and credibility in the community to bring together funders and key influencers, including educators, community organizations, and family partners, to co-design the model through structured feedback and planning sessions (Table 1). These working spaces prioritized asking tough questions to understand what Kansas City schools needed to succeed, identify system misalignments, and explore how partners could support sustainable change across schools with different structures and needs. Partners such as the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI), Dreams KC, and Turn the Page KC helped define how family and community engagement would function, while philanthropic partners, including the Kansas City Royals Foundation, the Sherman Family Foundation, the William T. Kemper Foundation — Commerce Bank, Trustee, and the Sosland Foundation, contributed or pledged financial support and strategic guidance.

Flexibility and Continuous Learning: LFAS was intentionally designed to provide flexibility at the school level while maintaining core, nonnegotiable elements. Each school has the autonomy to hire its literacy coach, select the tutoring format (in-person, online, or hybrid) and vendor, and shape family engagement. This flexibility enables schools to tailor the model to their existing strengths and needs, with some expanding services to additional grades or modifying coaching roles to align with their staffing structures.

Continuous learning is also a central component of the LFAS model. Through collaboration with UMKC’s UERC, SchoolSmartKC and community partners draw from ongoing data collection and analysis to monitor progress and guide improvement. Data review is viewed as a collaborative learning process rather than an accountability exercise, enabling partners to identify challenges, celebrate successes, and adjust support based on evidence.

TABLE 1: 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.

Partnerships

LFAS is built on the premise that sustainable improvement depends on shared ownership. SchoolSmartKC knew that improving literacy on a citywide scale would require deep, authentic partnerships to support lasting, systemic change. It set out to create an ecosystem where every partner could contribute according to its strengths and resources, from funders and schools to families and researchers. SchoolSmartKC's approach to collaboration and partnership was built on three strategies:



1. Build a Shared Vision and Ownership.

SchoolSmartKC aimed to create systemic alignment by uniting district and charter school leaders, community organizations, families, and funders around a shared vision for literacy. SchoolSmartKC sought to transform literacy efforts from isolated projects into a coordinated ecosystem capable of achieving long-term impact.

2. Design Inclusive and Flexible Structures That Will Support Sustainability.

SchoolSmartKC's partnership approach was multilayered and intentionally differentiated, with each school, community partner, and philanthropic organization serving a unique function within the LFAS model. Each partner, from funders to families, has a clearly defined role in promoting literacy and will have the opportunity to learn and adapt along the way. For example:

- **Schools** co-designed their LFAS implementation plans, aligning the model with their strengths and needs. Collaborations with New Leaders and UMKC's Institute for Urban Education have supported shared professional learning among principals and literacy coaches across district and charter contexts.
- **Philanthropic partners** committed to a four-year adopt-a-school funding model, moving away from short-term, project-based giving toward sustained engagement. This approach encourages funders to remain involved in the shared learning process and evaluation.
- **Community and family partners** such as PLTI, Dreams KC, and Turn the Page KC helped build authentic family participation, while the Kansas City Royals Foundation contributed to public engagement through literacy events that promote reading as a source of joy and community connection.

3. Sustain Collaboration Through Trust and Transparency.

Rather than acting as a top-down funder or program manager, SchoolSmartKC serves as a neutral convener and capacity builder, bringing together educators, funders, and community partners

around a shared vision for student success. SchoolSmartKC President and CEO Angelique Nedved, Ed.D., and Chief Program Officer Robin Henderson, Ph.D., support trusting and transparent relationships by creating open communication loops, inviting feedback, and adjusting course in response to partners' needs.

Implementation

In Year 1, the LFAS initiative translated its design framework into practice across nine schools that collectively serve about 1,600 students. Implementation focused on literacy coaching, high-dosage tutoring, capacity-building fellowships, family and community engagement, and continuous data collection and evaluation.

Literacy Coaching: Teachers and school leaders implemented structured literacy approaches aligned to the Science of Reading, supported by state-funded LETRS training, and LFAS provided instructional support from literacy coaches. Early survey data indicated strong teacher confidence in their coaches' expertise and usefulness in bridging research-based practice with classroom instruction (Table 2).²⁷ Educators noted that the literacy coach's role was essential in helping them apply what they had learned and refine their practice in real time.

TABLE 2: LFAS PARTICIPATING TEACHERS' CONFIDENCE IN PROVIDING SCIENCE OF READING-BACKED INSTRUCTION

Area of Confidence	Fall 2024	Spring 2025	Change
Phonemic Awareness	82%	87%	+5 percentage points
Phonics	57%	81%	+24 percentage points
Fluency	68%	76%	+8 percentage points
Vocabulary	79%	92%	+13 percentage points
Comprehension	84%	92%	+8 percentage points
Supporting Struggling Readers	60%	73%	+13 percentage points
Supporting Struggling Writers	35%	53%	+18 percentage points

Note: 50 teachers completed fall and spring surveys. Teacher confidence refers to survey respondents who felt confident or very confident. **Source:** UERC, "2024-2025 Literacy for All Students Evaluation Report," Internal report.

While educators praised the value of the literacy coach role, the accelerated launch made it challenging to fill positions in Year 1, with only two of the nine schools able to staff a full-time coach the summer before launch. SchoolSmartKC used the planned recruitment approach fully in Year 2, including sharing standardized job descriptions, managing candidate screening, and building a diverse and highly qualified talent pool. By Year 3, all participating schools successfully hired literacy coaches, reinforcing the importance of system-level supports for staffing and training. School leaders emphasized that having embedded coaches will increase the sustainability of literacy improvements beyond short-term professional development cycles.

High-Dosage Tutoring: Schools committed to providing K-3 students with at least 28 weeks of tutoring annually, using in-person, hybrid, and online models. Although approaches varied, early evidence showed that consistent tutoring engagement correlated with student progress and school leaders reported that the flexibility allowed them to select models that best fit their schools' schedules and student needs.

Capacity-Building Fellowships: Leadership and capacity building were incorporated from the start through the LFAS Leadership Fellowship. This fellowship brought principals and coaches together for shared professional learning and coaching, marking the first time many Kansas City district and charter leaders collaborated on a shared goal. Cohort 1 participants credited the fellowship with enhancing their instructional leadership, especially in providing feedback, observing literacy instruction, and supporting teacher growth. They also highlighted the need for clearer communication and scheduling, which led to improvements in the Cohort 2 experience.

Parent and Community Engagement: Parent and community engagement grew through the creation of the Advisory Council, which brought together families, educators, and community partners to offer feedback and guide implementation. Engagement levels varied, but the structure established a mechanism for shared voice and accountability. Parents expressed strong support for LFAS' goals, along with a desire for clearer communication regarding what the initiative meant for their children's daily experience. SchoolSmartKC and its partners responded by developing more accessible, culturally responsive communication materials and strengthening partnerships with family organizations such as PLTI and Dreams KC.

Continuous Data Collection and Evaluation: Ongoing data collection and evaluation, led by UMKC's UERC, provide the evidence base for reflection and improvement. Baseline data collection and regular progress monitoring were integrated into implementation, enabling partners to identify early trends. In spring 2025, nearly 40% of students in LFAS schools met their literacy growth targets.²⁸ These early data serve as a starting point for demonstrating progress toward improvement in the years to come.



Lessons Learned During the Launch of LFAS

Early challenges for LFAS led to key lessons for this initiative and for those who might replicate or adapt this model in their community or state context. The early success of LFAS stemmed from a clear vision that balanced fidelity and flexibility, authentic leadership, and widespread ongoing support within Kansas City's education community.

Lesson Learned: Balance fidelity, flexibility, and adaptability.

Ground literacy instruction in proven practices while allowing flexibility for schools to adapt to their own contexts. This approach builds both consistency and ownership: Maintaining consistent implementation and ongoing quality for all LFAS components (e.g., coaching, tutoring) across diverse schools is a challenge, particularly as the initiative scales. LFAS strives to balance fidelity to nonnegotiable, evidence-based components with flexibility for school-level autonomy. SchoolSmartKC's chief program officer provides regular and consistent check-ins with school and district leadership. To maintain a standard of quality, grant payments are spread throughout the year and tied to deliverables (e.g., progress reports). If a participating school is not on track or meeting deliverables, funds are not dispersed until deliverables are met or an agreed-upon amendment is reached.

Lesson Learned: Lead locally, align collectively.

Change is most durable when driven by a trusted backbone organization that brings together district, charter, family, philanthropic, and community partners to the table to co-create a vision, share ideas, and provide feedback. SchoolSmartKC's collaborative approach fostered shared learning, but coordinating multiple funders, districts, and community organizations required significant alignment and clear communication. Creating a foundation of trust while developing wide-ranging partnerships requires consistent communication with feedback opportunities. During LFAS' design, the thoughtful, trust-building approach brought alignment and buy-in for partners and schools. During its implementation, consistent communication, including acknowledging mistakes, built momentum and enthusiasm. Ensuring all partners used data consistently and understood both successes and setbacks took ongoing effort and intentional convening. SchoolSmartKC is a model of how a backbone organization can leverage its role as catalyst, convener, and coordinator to build public support.

Lesson Learned: Invest for the long term.

Multiyear funding and sustained coaching provide stability and capacity schools need to move from short-term interventions to lasting improvement. As Mississippi's 10-year results exemplify, real change does not happen overnight. It requires long-term commitment from funders, educators, parents, and communities. Early indicators of success, such as increased teacher confidence, 40% of students meeting their growth targets, and full implementation of the model in 12 schools, including three new schools in the 2025-26 school year, can help support buy-in and momentum.²⁹ SchoolSmartKC is building sustainable buy-in through quarterly updates to public dashboards and planned parent data summits, and by soliciting input through its Advisory Council.

What Other Cities Can Replicate From the LFAS Model

- **Leadership from a backbone organization** that acts as catalyst, convener, and coordinator to align funders, schools, and community partners.
- **A unified citywide literacy vision** anchored in evidence-based Science of Reading practices and lessons learned from LFAS and other literacy initiatives.
- **Collaboration** that fosters authentic family and community engagement and buy-in.
- **Investment in teacher and leader development** that builds long-term capacity.
- **A layered, holistic model of support** that includes literacy coaching, tutoring, leadership development, and continuous improvement and evaluation.
- **Aligned philanthropic and public resources** to close local gaps in education opportunity.

Conclusion

Since spring 2024, LFAS has established a clear framework for citywide literacy improvement anchored in evidence-based instruction, strong partnerships, and data-driven learning. By adapting lessons from Mississippi's success to Kansas City's context, SchoolSmartKC is betting that coordinated, locally led action can drive measurable results at scale. SchoolSmartKC aims to increase citywide third-grade reading proficiency from 23% in 2024 to 33% by 2028, representing an average gain of two to three percentage points per year for each participating cohort. This growth trajectory may be possible with sustained collaboration, embedded coaching, and targeted instruction and tutoring grounded in the Science of Reading.

More than a siloed, short-term initiative, the LFAS model serves as a proof point that cities can align diverse education systems, including both district and charter schools as well as diverse funders and nonprofit organizations, around a shared student literacy agenda. If Kansas City reaches its 2028 targets, LFAS will stand as one of the most comprehensive locally coordinated literacy improvement efforts in the nation and show that when communities come together, all students can succeed. ✦

Appendix

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 Accountability³⁰</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.³¹
<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.³² • 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,³³ 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.

Endnotes

- 1 Based on 2024 Kansas City Public Education System data, with 15% proficient and 8% advanced. "Data for Action Summit: Kansas City Public Education System," SchoolSmartKC et al., presentation, slide 11, June 2025, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1q2SYRNVXeFEiULWx1YfXO44oyG8sFkuL/view?usp=drive_link.
- 2 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.
- 3 See, for example: Alpha Diallo, "Improving Literacy in the United States: Recommendations for Increasing Reading Success," Center for American Progress, May 28, 2020, "Policy Interventions" section, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/improving-literacy-united-states-recommendations-increasing-reading-success/>.
- 4 *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>.
- 5 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 14, <https://bellwether.org/publications/on-the-same-page/>.
- 6 See, for example: 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/>; Robson Foster et al., *On the Same Page*, slide 18.
- 7 "Policy Circle Brief: Literacy," The Policy Circle, updated August 1, 2022, <https://www.thepolicycircle.org/briefs/literacy/>; Vineis, "Future of Work," para. 3.
- 8 The Policy Circle, "Policy Circle Brief: Literacy."
- 9 Authors' estimate of low adult literacy in the Kansas City bi-state region, based on federal survey data and census population counts.
- 10 Maureen W. Lovett et al., "Early Intervention for Children at Risk for Reading Disabilities: The Impact of Grade at Intervention and Individual Differences on Intervention Outcomes," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 109, no. 7 (2017): 889–914, abstract, <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu000181>.
- 11 Based on 2024 KCPES (combining KCPS 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.
- 12 Authors' calculation; Kansas City does not publicly report enrollment by grade level. Approximately an equal number of students attend district (52%) and charter (48%) schools in Kansas City; Jose De Jesus Sotelo, "MCPSA Research: Enrollment Trends in Missouri Charter Schools. A 2019 – 2025 Analysis," May 12, 2025, <https://www.mocharterschools.org/news/features/mcpsa-research-enrollment-trends-in-missouri-charter-schools-a-2019-2025-analysis/>. In 2021, there were 1,100 third graders in Kansas City Public Schools, so authors assume an equal number for district schools; Maria Benevento, "For the First Time, More K-12 Students Are Attending Charters Than Kansas City Public Schools," *Education*, KCUR NPR, November 29, 2021, <https://www.kcur.org/education/2021-11-29/for-the-first-time-more-k-12-students-are-attending-charters-than-kansas-city-public-schools> (77% × 2,200).
- 13 Jeanne Wanzek et al., "Current Evidence on the Effects of Intensive Early Reading Interventions," *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 51, no. 6 (2018): 612–624, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022219418775110>.
- 14 Mo. Rev. Stat. § 170.014 (2025), <https://revisor.mo.gov/main/OneSection.aspx?section=170.014&bid=57301>.
- 15 Robson Foster et al., *On the Same Page*, slide 7; Bonnie B. Armbruster, Fran Lehr, and Jean Osborn, *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read* (Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, 2001), "Phonemic Awareness Instruction" section, para. 1, https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/html/prfteachers/reading_first_print.html.
- 16 University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development. "Q&A: Why the Science of Reading Is as Important as Ever." *UVA News & Stories*, June 24, 2020, <https://education.virginia.edu/news-stories/qa-why-science-reading-important-ever>.
- 17 Sarah Schwartz, "Which States Have Passed 'Science of Reading' Laws? What's in Them?," *EducationWeek*, updated October 9, 2025, para. 5, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/which-states-have-passed-science-of-reading-laws-whats-in-them/2022/07>.
- 18 Ibid.

- 19 Mo. Rev. Stat. § 170.014 (2022), <https://revisor.mo.gov/main/OneSection.aspx?section=170.014&bid=51400>. Missouri passed the 2022 Reading Instruction Act mandating evidence-based reading instruction (170.014). In 2025, Missouri updated the act, banning the practice of three-cueing as a primary instructional method, although it is permitted as a supplemental tool; Olivia Shannon, “SB 556: Current Bill Summary,” Missouri Senate, https://www.senate.mo.gov/25info/BTS_Web/Bill.aspx?SessionType=r&BillID=2236257.
- 20 “DESE’s Literacy Initiatives & Efforts: Missouri Read, Lead, Exceed,” Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, para. 1, <https://dese.mo.gov/college-career-readiness/literacy>.
- 21 “Literacy-Based Promotion Act,” Mississippi Department of Education, <https://mdek12.org/literacy/lbpa/>.
- 22 Miss. Code § 37-177-1 (2024), <https://law.justia.com/codes/mississippi/title-37/chapter-177/section-37-177-19/>.
- 23 *Mississippi’s 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress* (Mississippi Department of Education, 2025).
- 24 Mo. Rev. Stat. § 170.014 (2025); Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, “Missouri Read, Lead, Exceed.”
- 25 Note that KCPES includes all public district and charter schools in Kansas City, Missouri.
- 26 According to the Milken Institute, “Place-based philanthropy describes an approach that targets a specific location — be it a neighborhood, municipality, or even multiple counties — upon which to focus charitable resources and make a transformative impact. It goes beyond supporting a community foundation or funding unrelated efforts in a contained space.” “Understanding Place-Based Philanthropy,” Milken Institute, September 23, 2020, para. 1, <https://milkeninstitute.org/content-hub/collections/articles/understanding-place-based-philanthropy>.
- 27 UERC. *2024-2025 Literacy for All Students Evaluation Report*. Internal report.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 “Literacy-Based Promotion Act,” Mississippi Department of Education, <https://mdek12.org/literacy/lbpa/>.
- 31 Mo. Rev. Stat. § 170.014 (2025).
- 32 *Literacy Initiatives Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)* (Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education), 2, <https://dese.mo.gov/media/pdf/literacy-initiatives-frequently-asked-questions-faq>.
- 33 Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, “Missouri Read, Lead, Exceed.”

About the Authors



LYNNE WELLS GRAZIANO

Lynne Wells Graziano is a senior analyst at Bellwether. She can be reached at lynne.graziano@bellwether.org.



JESSICA SLATON

Jessica Slaton is an associate partner at Bellwether. She can be reached at jessica.slaton@bellwether.org.



DANIELA TORRE GIBNEY

Daniela Torre Gibney is a senior associate partner at Bellwether. She can be reached at daniela.torregibney@bellwether.org.



TITILAYO TINUBU ALI

Titilayo Tinubu Ali is a partner at Bellwether and leads the organization's work on early childhood education. She can be reached at titilayo.ali@bellwether.org.

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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the many experts who gave their time and shared their knowledge with us to inform our work. Thank you also to SchoolSmartKC for its financial support of this project.

We would also like to thank our Bellwether colleagues Brian Robinson for his input and Alexis Richardson for her support. Thank you to Amy Ribock, Kate Stein, Andy Jacob, McKenzie Maxson, Temim Fruchter, Julie Nguyen, and Amber Walker for shepherding and disseminating this work, and to Super Copy Editors.

The contributions of these individuals and entities significantly enhanced our work; however, any errors in fact or analysis remain the responsibility of the authors.



© 2026 Bellwether

- © This report carries a Creative Commons license, which permits noncommercial reuse of content when proper attribution is provided. This means you are free to copy, display, and distribute this work, or include content from this report in derivative works, under the following conditions:
- ① **Attribution.** You must clearly attribute the work to Bellwether and provide a link back to the publication at www.bellwether.org.
- ② **Noncommercial.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes without explicit prior permission from Bellwether.
- ③ **Share Alike.** If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under a license identical to this one.

For the full legal code of this Creative Commons license, please visit www.creativecommons.org. If you have any questions about citing or reusing Bellwether content, please contact us.