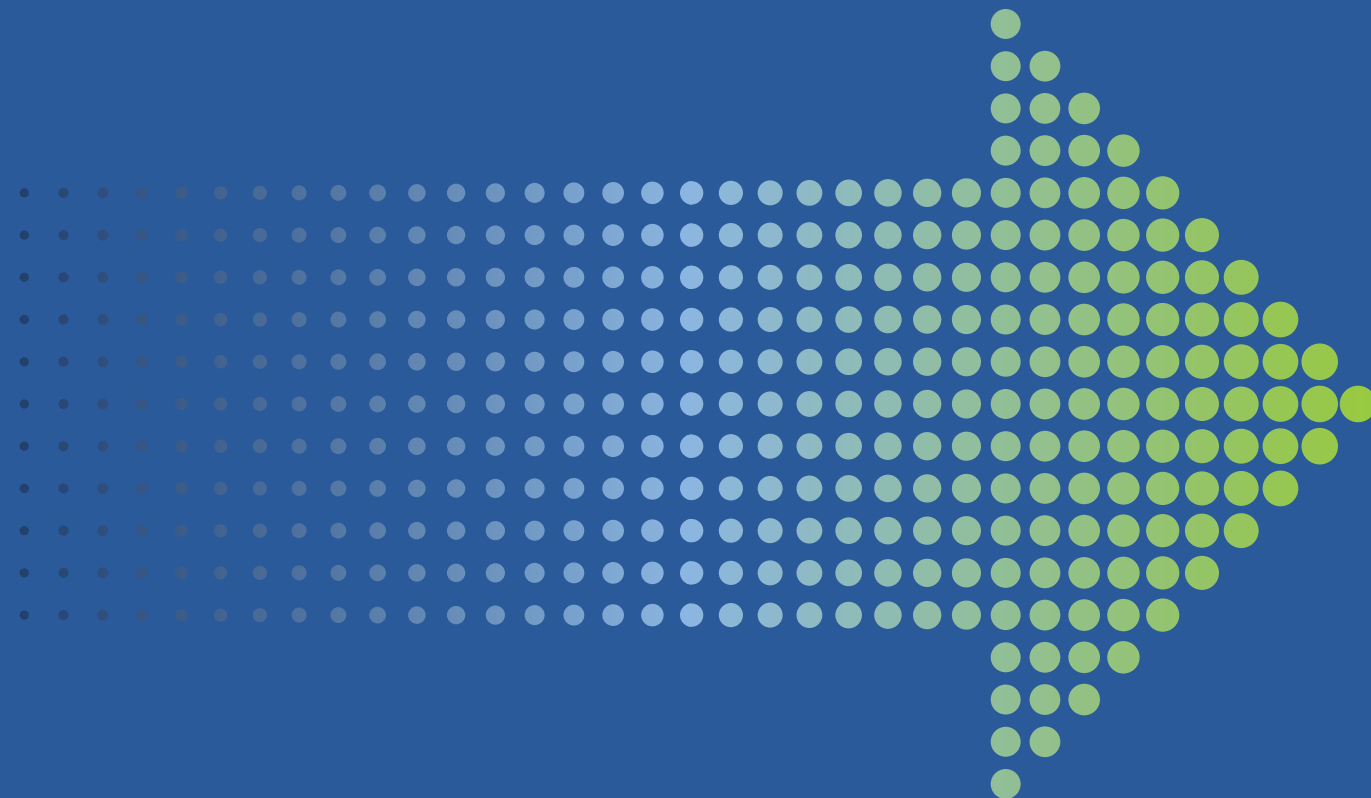


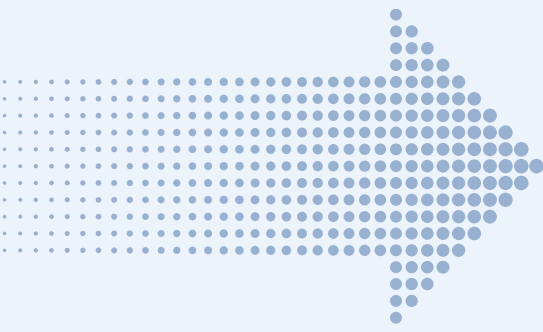


# FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE:

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Improving Early Literacy with  
Insights from California Educators





## INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

*“Once you learn to read, you will forever be free.”* Frederick Douglass’ powerful words underscore the profound impact of literacy. In California, a stark reality exists. According to the [2024 NAEP results \(the Nation’s Report Card\)](#), only 29 percent of our state’s 4th graders are reading at or above proficiency levels.<sup>1</sup> This staggering literacy gap not only jeopardizes individual potential but also threatens our collective future, as strong reading skills are the catalyst for a student’s long-term success.

The path to post-secondary success is through literacy. Literacy empowers individuals to access information, engage actively in society, and advance both academic and economic outcomes. Early literacy, in particular, is crucial as it provides students with the best chance for future success. California’s educators are on the front lines of the state’s literacy crisis.

As California educators and Teach Plus California Policy Fellows, we believe that to bridge this gap, we must empower students by preparing and supporting their educators to teach them how to read. By providing teachers with the appropriate professional development, ongoing coaching, and high-quality instructional materials, we can ensure that teachers are equipped to make a profound difference in student outcomes.

Now, California Governor Gavin Newsom and state leaders have created an unprecedented opportunity to address this challenge head-on with a range of investments and policy changes to prioritize early literacy instruction. The state is prioritizing the high-leverage components needed to reverse the low literacy trend with key investments in the 2025-26 state budget, including \$215 million in dedicated funding for coaching, \$200 million for professional development, \$40 million for the implementation of the reading difficulties screeners, \$7.5 million for a New Literacy Support Network for English Learners, and the adoption of additional evidence-based materials.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the Legislature passed legislation, [Assembly Bill 1454](#) (2025), to ensure that the preparation of administrators, as well as reading and literacy specialists, is rooted in evidence-based practices and meets the needs of California’s multilingual learners.<sup>3</sup>

While these budgetary and policy changes hold great potential to improve reading instruction, it will only be realized if it leads to changing practice in classrooms and schools. To bridge the gap between policy adoption and practice shifts, this report elevates the voices, experiences, and needs of California teachers who will ensure these vital investments lead to significant improvements in student literacy.

# METHODOLOGY

In April 2025, we conducted 24 focus groups with 40 teachers, curriculum coaches, reading interventionists, and administrators to identify the challenges of improving literacy across California. Participants were asked a variety of quantitative and qualitative questions about their experiences with California's literacy instructional materials, professional development opportunities, and overall reading instruction. In particular, we aimed to better understand in our focus groups how well-prepared teachers felt to teach their students to read and identify challenges to improve instruction for all students, with a particular focus on addressing the needs of multilingual learners.

The groups included K-8 general education teachers, special education teachers, English Language Development teachers, and reading specialists. Most participants had over 10 years of experience, and the majority worked in elementary school settings and public schools. The data collected was analyzed by the Teach Plus National Research Team, in collaboration with our Teach Plus California Early Literacy Working Group, to identify key themes and patterns in the experiences of teachers throughout the state.

## FINDINGS

### 1. Teachers reported inconsistent access to curriculum rooted in evidence-based practices and a lack of resources to meet the unique needs of multilingual learners.

Teachers reported that in many of their schools current curriculum and assessments are not aligned with evidence-based literacy practices, particularly those grounded in the science of reading (SOR). *"Teachers [should be] provided with, and using, HQIM [high quality instructional materials], as well as training with such. HQIM should be vetted and based in science with a scope and sequence following the science of reading in foundational skills to reach our young learners."*—K-8 teacher<sup>4</sup> Foundational literacy skills are often not adequately addressed in the curriculum used in early grades, making it harder for students to catch up in later years. Assessments tend to focus on skills that have not been explicitly taught, further exacerbating achievement gaps. *"There is a disconnect between the curriculum used and the skills assessed. Students are not offered foundational learning opportunities to address reading gaps. If we don't address foundational skills in pre-K/TK/K then students will find it harder to catch up in primary grades. The curriculum in primary grades does NOT address foundational skills."*—6th grade teacher<sup>5</sup>

Frustrated by fragmented approaches, educators in our focus groups advocated for a unified, evidence-based curriculum to ensure consistent and effective literacy instruction statewide—particularly calling out the need for common materials for multilingual learners. *"We need curriculum that supports these students. Most of what I'm doing is created by myself or other teachers. This results in a lack of consistency across the district and schools with how and what English learners are being taught."*—1st grade teacher<sup>6</sup>

Multilingual learners require targeted instruction that includes both home language support and English language development, as well as culturally responsive materials that draw on students' experiences and existing knowledge. Teachers in our focus groups cited a lack of curriculum variety in home languages and structural limitations in how students are grouped. *"We need robust teaching materials that highlight language learning in not only ELA [English language arts] but home languages as possible."*—K-8 teacher<sup>7</sup>

Many teachers reported the difficulties of working with a wide range of proficiency levels within a single classroom.

*"English learners arrive with very different skill sets. Some are highly educated in their home language and just need an opportunity to learn enough English to enable those skills to transfer while some have very limited educational experience. Different strategies are needed depending on the students' experiences."*—high school Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) teacher<sup>8</sup>

## **2. To improve instruction, teachers need ongoing, job-embedded, data-driven, hands-on professional development and coaching that are differentiated for their student population and the teachers' existing knowledge of Structured Literacy instruction.**

While some teachers felt well-versed in evidence-based literacy instruction, many, particularly those teaching grades 4-8 or non-ELA courses, felt unprepared to support students with foundational reading gaps. Teachers of multilingual learners reported an even greater need for specialized training to address dual language development and culturally relevant instruction. These instructional knowledge gaps limit the impact of instructional materials and student interventions, focus group participants said. *"Most teachers want to help their students, but without the knowledge, time to process and learn, continuing development of skills, they are left in limbo and must piece together what they think will work for their students."*—K-8 teacher<sup>9</sup>

All participating teachers in our focus groups said that professional development (PD) would be an effective state policy investment and had many suggestions for how that investment can be most impactful. *"Teachers need more training in how to teach reading using proven methods. Professional development should be ongoing, not just one-time. It should include help with teaching phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension. Teachers also need support in using data and helping English learners and struggling readers."*—middle school ELA teacher<sup>10</sup>

Teachers in our focus groups emphasized that professional development alone is not sufficient to shift instructional practice. *"No 'one and done' PD—It needs to be ongoing with coaching. It needs to become a part of the fabric of a school, not an isolated event."*—elementary ELA and English Learning teacher<sup>11</sup> Teachers elevated many characteristics of coaching and professional learning models that can help make these feel like part of that fabric of the schools. They pointed to ongoing coaching, where expert coaches provide classroom modeling, observation, and immediate feedback. Additionally, coaching that is data-driven, collaborative, and job-embedded builds instructional competency and consistency across classrooms and schools, focus group participants stated.

*“Ongoing coaching and professional development should be readily accessible, allowing educators to receive personalized feedback and support tailored to their individual needs and the unique challenges they face in the classroom.”*  
—2nd grade teacher<sup>12</sup>

### **3. Teachers called for collaboration and planning time, specialists or support staff, and materials to effectively address the varying skill levels and needs of their students.**

When asked to prioritize the literacy proposals reflected in Governor Newsom's original January budget—professional development, literacy coaches and specialists, training on using reading difficulties screeners, and high-quality instructional materials—teachers saw a need for all four. The focus group discussions made it clear that it was less a question of which support is more important and more about how to ensure each of these supports is most effective, and how schools can build out the structures to use these supports as part of a comprehensive literacy improvement structure.

Teachers were clear that time is an essential component to improving practice—time to plan, collaborate, coach and train, and differentiate instruction. *“To effectively enhance reading instruction and boost student literacy achievement, teachers must have sufficient planning time to develop lesson plans and instructional strategies. Collaborative opportunities should be available for educators to share best practices, resources, and insights, fostering an environment of continuous improvement.”*—2nd grade teacher<sup>13</sup>

*“We [teachers] value coaching that allows for meaningful collaboration — teachers want to use planning periods strategically to collaborate with their coaches on planning lessons and going over data, and would like to use PLC [professional learning community] or grade-level meeting time to work collaboratively with coaches and other teachers.”*  
—3rd grade teacher<sup>14</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

California is in a unique moment to transform reading instruction and the experiences of our students with nearly \$500 million in new state funds, tools in the reading difficulties screeners, and the opportunity to adopt new evidence-based instructional materials. Both state and local leaders have a responsibility to ensure we make the most of this literacy investment.

As the state rolls out these new programs and distributes the money, it must provide guidance and oversight that ensures local education leaders are successful.<sup>15</sup> To maximize the impact of the new state investments and policy changes for literacy instruction, local education agencies (LEAs) should strategically invest in evidence-based strategies to address the root causes of literacy gaps and build lasting instructional capacity within California schools. We propose three recommendations for the state and LEAs to turn policy into powerful tools for student success.

**1. State leaders must ensure that the new resources and programs are integrated into a comprehensive literacy roadmap and provide meaningful support and oversight for its implementation.**

A significant barrier to improving reading instruction is the lack of a cohesive, statewide strategy. Without a central body to unify these efforts, districts will continue to face fragmented approaches and varying student outcomes. To break this cycle, we recommend that the state designate an oversight body and structures to provide the coordinated leadership and oversight that LEAs need.

Over the last several years, the California Department of Education (CDE) has taken steps to provide state-level leadership on the teaching and learning of reading, including creating a literacy task force, hiring statewide literacy co-directors to construct the [Literacy Roadmap](#),<sup>16</sup> and developing the federally required [State Literacy Plan](#).<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, it was unclear to many educators in our focus groups who is responsible for the oversight of the state's literacy plan. Recent investments require the CDE to update its guidance, craft grant guidelines, and provide meaningful oversight to ensure that LEAs are utilizing these grants in a comprehensive way. This approach should be modeled on successful initiatives,<sup>18</sup> like one in Alabama, which demonstrated how a focused literacy framework supported equitable outcomes for all students.<sup>19</sup>

**Comprehensive California oversight should include:**

- + ***Aligning professional development with the curriculum:*** Ensure that all training is directly connected to the high-quality instructional materials used by teachers. This builds a consistent statewide knowledge base and empowers educators with the skills needed to implement a cohesive, evidence-based approach. There is a concrete opportunity in the implementation of the newest professional development grants to be more explicit in the requirements and guidance for those grant dollars to do this.
- + ***Establishing a consistent instructional framework:*** Ensure that the state's literacy standards and the instructional materials used to teach them are fully aligned. This means that a student moving from one school to another within the state will encounter a consistent instructional framework, reducing the achievement gap and providing stability. Although the upcoming materials adoption will only be supplemental, it is important to signal which of the already adopted materials are not fully aligned, based on the criteria of the supplemental adoption.
- + ***Advancing use of implementation toolkit:*** While the State Board of Education has developed robust toolkits, many educators and county leaders remain unaware of their availability or do not actively utilize them. The state should elevate their visibility, streamline access, and offer tailored guidance to support the effective translation of these resources into local contexts.

## 2. State and local leaders should leverage new resources to foster a structured, data-driven coaching model and job-embedded professional development.

As illustrated by the educators in our focus groups, one-time professional development workshops are insufficient for mastering new instructional practices. Teachers want and need ongoing, job-embedded support. Therefore, districts must move beyond traditional workshops to implement a comprehensive, sustainable instructional coaching model for literacy, rooted in research-based methods.<sup>20</sup>

California leaders should provide guidance in utilizing the professional development and instructional coaching grants that encourage districts to adopt robust coaching models and sustained, job-embedded professional development programs, reflecting evidence-based characteristics.

### District leaders should adopt coaching models that:

- + **Adopt a student-centered approach:** Coaching is focused on improving student outcomes, not just teacher performance. Coaches help teachers analyze student work, performance on assessments, and classroom engagement to identify specific areas for growth.
- + **Translate research into practice:** Coaches act as a bridge to support understanding of the extensive body of research based on the science of reading into daily classroom practices. They help teachers translate complex concepts like phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency into explicit, systematic lessons.
- + **Center data-informed collaboration and problem solving:** Coaches guide teachers in collecting and analyzing various data, from universal screening results and classroom assessments to observations and student interviews. This data helps teachers collaboratively identify problems, set specific goals, and plan targeted, evidence-based interventions for students with coach and grade-level teams.
- + **Implement differentiated coaching:** Recognizing that every teacher has different needs, coaching provides differentiated support through classroom modeling, co-teaching, and ongoing cycles of observation and feedback.
- + **Build capacity:** A centralized position or external partnership should be established to provide ongoing training for literacy coaches, ensuring quality and sustainability even with staff turnover.<sup>21</sup>



### 3. Local leaders should leverage the influx of new resources and the opportunity to adopt new instructional materials to cultivate a culture of continuous improvement.

With the state's multi-pronged approach to this literacy instruction investment, LEAs have a unique opportunity to build sustainable plans for literacy improvement. District leaders must leverage this framework to operationalize change, moving beyond mere compliance to foster a culture where continuous professional growth is the norm. LEAs must plan to leverage the funds as a long-term investment in transforming a system where evidence-based practices are consistently used.

#### District and school leaders should:

- + **Equip administrators to be instructional leaders:** Leverage the training mandated by AB 1454 to ensure site administrators are equipped to lead literacy initiatives. This includes providing strategic planning guidance to help administrators integrate literacy as a central component of their school's vision.
- + **Foster accountability and alignment:** Aligning between adopted curriculum, instructional practices and materials, and assessments would allow leaders to monitor and measure the effectiveness of their literacy programs. This would allow for a cycle of continuous improvement, ensuring that every strategic investment leads to measurable student success. A robust accountability system should include checklists for evaluating current programs and templates for strategic planning.
- + **Facilitate collaborative networks:** While California will support three county offices to serve as literacy lead agencies and lead professional learning, in order to reach more teachers, it is important for district leaders to establish their own professional learning communities where district leaders and educators share best practices, problem-solve implementation challenges, and provide direct feedback to the [literacy lead agencies](#)<sup>22</sup> and state leaders on the effectiveness of the resources and guidance.

## CONCLUSION

In order to disrupt the cycle of inequity and dismantle traditionally held beliefs and practices that have left two-thirds of our students behind in literacy, we must ensure investments are: strategic, coordinated, and lead to sustainable support for every classroom. California has made great strides in recognizing reading as a skill that must be taught explicitly, and state leaders have worked to create policy that incorporates evidence-based literacy as the gold standard for this instruction.

By championing consistent, cohesive implementation of literacy instruction, state and district leaders can lead the charge to dismantle systemic barriers and empower a generation of students to become confident, proficient readers. Taking action would be a profound investment in our shared future, one where every child in California has a path to opportunity and every classroom is equipped to unlock students' limitless potential.



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## ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning for students. [teachplus.org/CA](https://teachplus.org/CA)



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# APPENDIX

## Focus Group Discussion Questions:

17. What are the biggest barriers or challenges to improving reading instruction and students' literacy achievement that you are seeing in your classrooms and schools?
18. What are the unique challenges in teaching reading to English learners?
19. What recommendations do you have for improving reading instruction for English learners? This could include resources, support, or other aspects that impact literacy instruction for English learners.
20. What improvements in professional development are needed to improve literacy instruction?
21. How should literacy coaching be structured to be most effective in improving your instruction?
22. What should policymakers keep in mind when considering implementing and training teachers to use screeners to identify struggling readers?
23. What else would you like to share with policymakers around improving reading instruction and student literacy achievement?

## ENDNOTES

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4 See Appendix Question 17, K-8 teacher

5 See Appendix Question 17, 6th grade teacher

6 See Appendix question 20, 1st grade general education teacher

7 See Appendix question 20, K-8 teacher

8 See Appendix question 18, high school AVID teacher

9 See Appendix Question 26, K-8 teacher

10 See Appendix Question 23, middle school ELA teacher

11 See Appendix Question 23, elementary ELA and English Learning Development teacher

12 See Appendix Question 26, 2nd Grade teacher

13 See Appendix question 26, 2nd grade teacher

14 See Appendix Question 16, 3rd Grade teacher

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