

Building on Our Literacy Success

Recommendations from Teach Plus
Mississippi Policy Fellows



Teach Plus Mississippi envisions our state as a place where all of our children succeed and have fulfilling lives and careers. We know that literacy is a critically important part of making that vision a reality. Our teacher leaders are focused on postsecondary success for our students. They also recognize that whether our high school graduates aspire to enter college, military service, or the workforce, they will have to know how to read.

It's been a little over two decades since Mississippi began to embrace an evidence-based approach to literacy, known as "the science of reading." The investments made in teacher training and coaching, combined by a state-level commitment to taking best practices to scale by legislators and the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), has yielded nationally recognized literacy gains that are transforming the lives of young Mississippians. As Teach Plus Policy Fellows and longtime Mississippi educators, we are confident that our historic literacy gains in the early grades can be expanded to middle school and beyond. But this will require identifying and acknowledging shortcomings in Mississippi's current approach to literacy and taking intentional steps to improve literacy instruction across the state.

One of the key challenges is that many Mississippi teachers do not have the training and coaching on the instructional strategies that have transformed reading proficiency in early elementary grades. This is our takeaway from surveying nearly 100 Mississippi teachers who shared insights on how the science of reading is being implemented in their schools and districts. These survey results inform the following memo, which underscores how the five pillars of literacy—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—can enhance reading instruction, and provides direction in how we can ensure that all Mississippi teachers are effective practitioners of the science of reading.

FINDINGS

1. Many Mississippi teachers feel unprepared to teach foundational skills like phonics and fluency, despite recognizing their importance.

Most Mississippi teachers feel confident in teaching reading comprehension, but far fewer feel equipped to teach other foundational skills effectively. While about 90 percent of survey respondents were confident in teaching vocabulary and reading comprehension, only 54 percent were confident in teaching phonemic awareness (distinguishing and manipulating individual sounds) and only 59 percent were confident in teaching phonics (connecting letters and sounds to decode written words).

"I've had ample training in reading comprehension but not enough in foundational reading skills such as phonics."

—Mississippi elementary teacher

2. Teachers in upper elementary and middle school lack access to aligned curriculum, professional learning, and opportunities for collaboration, all of which are necessary to support effective reading instruction.

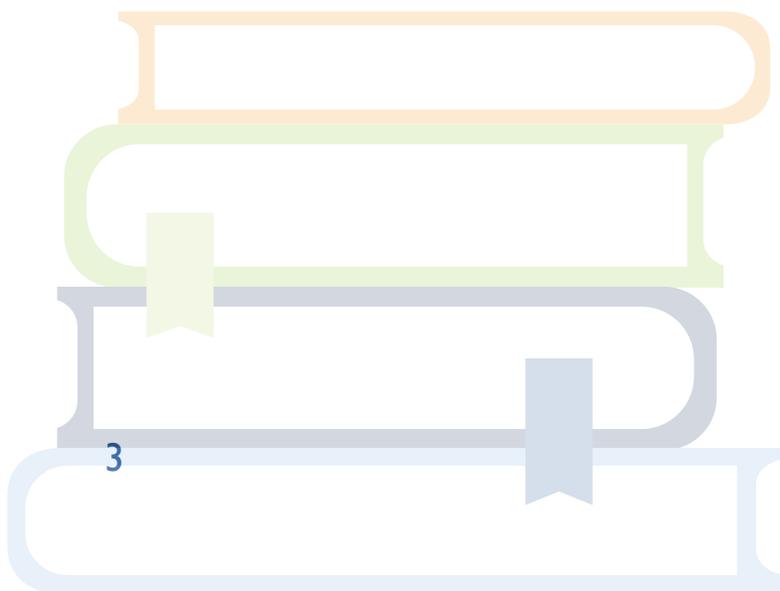
Teachers of older grade readers enter the classroom without the training to teach foundational skills—less than half felt their preparation programs adequately prepared them to teach phonics, phonemic awareness, and fluency. This results in many teachers seeking self-directed professional development. Unfortunately, professional learning opportunities in phonics and phonemic awareness diminish for teachers in grades 4-8, where the instructional focus shifts heavily toward comprehension—reading to learn rather than learning to read—to maximize assessment outcomes. While nearly all survey respondents teaching in 4th-8th grades felt confident in teaching vocabulary and comprehension, only about half felt confident in teaching phonemic awareness and phonics.¹ What's more, the majority of respondents reported receiving training or coaching in vocabulary and comprehension, while much fewer received it in phonics and phonemic awareness.² This approach, while understandable, overlooks the reality that many struggling readers in upper grades lack fundamental decoding skills.

+ “I have attended trainings when I taught 1st and 2nd grade that focused on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Trainings were helpful and students were outstanding readers. However, teaching 3rd-5th, trainings are not available, but the five pillars are necessary for those grade levels to ensure most or all students are reading on grade level.”

—Mississippi elementary teacher

+ “We do not receive phonics training and although students should be able to fluently read, many 8th graders are still struggling with phonics.”

—Mississippi middle school teacher



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure that educator preparation programs are preparing all aspiring K-8 teachers in all five pillars of reading.

Mississippi's reading gains can be attributed in part to the foundational literacy requirements for aspiring K-3 teachers. An important step towards building on our success would be to require all newly certified K-8 teachers - rather than just K-3 teachers - to be trained in the science of reading. Fourth to eighth grade teachers should also complete a foundational science of reading training and assessments as part of licensure requirements.

2. Expand aligned professional learning and critical literacy supports across all grade levels to ensure that every school is built for children to learn to read.

Expanding professional learning in Mississippi should begin by scaling any existing programs for K-3 teachers to include all K-8 teachers in all subjects. This should include training secondary teachers in each of the five pillars of literacy instruction. Additionally, Mississippi could provide universal literacy screenings beyond K-3 to identify struggling readers and provide targeted interventions to move them to proficiency. To support the implementation of these changes in diverse classroom settings, Mississippi should also invest in long-term, embedded literacy coaching for educators.

Research shows that middle school students who struggle with reading are more likely to face academic challenges in high school and beyond. Effective intervention in grades 4-8 ensures students are better prepared for the rigorous reading and writing demands of high school, college, and careers. Explicit instruction in foundational skills such as phonics, fluency, and comprehension allows educators to diagnose and address reading gaps. Targeted interventions can help struggling readers decode words, build fluency, and comprehend complex texts, enabling them to catch up to grade level.

3. Support districts in providing teachers with a strong curriculum rooted in all five pillars of reading, including phonics and phonemic awareness.

In addition to training teachers through educator preparation and professional development, Mississippi can support implementation of the science of reading by developing a curated list of high-quality curricula and instructional materials (HQIM) rooted in the five pillars of reading. To ensure maximum utilization, there should be incentives for school districts to pull from these resources, as well as aligned professional learning that supports teachers in using the curricula. The curricula should provide adequate support for phonics and phonemic awareness, in addition to the other pillars. It will also be helpful for Mississippi to collect data on what curriculum teachers are using in each district and match this with data on how these districts are performing in reading proficiency, including student subgroups. This data should be readily available.

CONCLUSION

Mississippi has a lot to celebrate when it comes to the remarkable gains young learners have made in literacy. The growth was a product of important policy changes and investments that led to the adoption of evidence-based practices, teacher training and coaching, targeted interventions, and instructional materials aligned to the science of reading. The results of our survey highlight the opportunity for our state to build on our approach by broadening our recipe for literacy success to reach upper-elementary and middle school classrooms. Doing so will allow us to secure a future where all students achieve reading proficiency and can pursue a path to academic success and lifelong learning. We welcome the opportunity to discuss these findings further and explore actionable steps.

AUTHORS:

Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellows

- + Hannah Bagwell (Sr. Policy Fellow), Rankin County School District
- + Allison Bunn, Oxford School District
- + Yulanda Campbell, Sunflower County Consolidated School District
- + Jermeka Carter, Tunica County School District
- + Tracee Thompson, Jackson Public School District
- + Kimberly Williams, Mississippi Achievement School District, Yazoo City Region

Sanford Johnson, Teach Plus Mississippi Executive Director

Toren Ballard, Teach Plus Mississippi State Policy Consultant

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. teachplus.org

ENDNOTES

1 Of the 49 respondents teaching 4th-8th grade, 47 and 46 felt confident teaching vocabulary and comprehension, respectively. In comparison, only 24 and 25 felt confident teaching phonemic awareness and phonics, respectively.

2 Of the 49 respondents teaching 4th-8th grade, 33 receive ongoing training and 36 coaching in comprehension, 34 receive ongoing training or coaching in vocabulary, and 18 receive ongoing training while only 10 receive coaching in phonemic awareness/phonics.

TEACH +PLUS |

teachplus.org/MS
X@TeachPlusMS