



Continuing the Marathon:

Recommendations from Teach Plus MS Policy Fellows

Introduction

Nationally recognized as the “Mississippi Miracle,” the state’s early literacy success is the result of over two decades of commitment to the science of reading. By implementing game-changing policies, investments, and instructional shifts, Mississippi has produced remarkable results. However, because literacy development continues beyond the third grade, we must now extend structured literacy and targeted interventions into grades 4–8 to sustain these statewide gains.

Lessons to Build on Success

In April 2025, Teach Plus Policy Fellows surveyed over 100 literacy teachers and coaches to learn how the science of reading has been implemented in their schools or districts. Survey respondents from 4-8th grade classrooms expressed a significant level of unpreparedness to address foundational literacy gaps among their students. In our policy brief [Building on Our Literacy Success](#), we encouraged more support for training, professional development, and curricula for all K-8 teachers that are aligned to the science of reading.

Since then, student data and policy experts have highlighted the need for a stronger focus on adolescent reading. In 2024, NAEP scores showed that "eighth grade reading is where the state has seen the least progress over time. It is also the only area that did not see any improvement between 2022 and 2024" ([Mississippi First](#)). When the [Fordham Institute](#) recently asked experts what’s next for the science of reading to fulfill its promise, looking beyond K-3 was a key theme. Some have called it “the [next frontier](#) in the reading revolution”.

Adolescent Literacy Investments in Other States

Several other states have already taken steps to address adolescent literacy to ensure reading growth continues as texts get more complex. Here are just a few recent examples:

- + **Indiana:** passed a law (2024) requiring the State Department of Education to establish a system for identifying struggling readers in grades 4–8, expanding adolescent literacy supports beyond early grades.
- + **Alabama:** appropriated \$10 million in additional funding specifically to support literacy efforts beyond third grade, helping older readers get the instruction they need.

- + **New Mexico:** allocated resources to train all 6–12 ELA, English language development, and special education teachers in evidence-based reading instruction for adolescent learners.

Local Efforts in Mississippi

In Mississippi, two middle schools have been putting evidence-based adolescent literacy practices in action. At Laurel Middle School, a pilot program is currently underway with support from the [Florida Center for Reading Research](#). A second pilot program is operating at Blackburn Middle School in Jackson and is being developed by the [Mississippi Reading Clinic](#), a legacy program of the Barksdale Reading Institute. Both programs are working to ensure that upper-elementary and middle school teachers are receiving training and coaching in the science of reading. These programs also offer additional innovative practices, such as...

- + **Providing cross-content training in the science of reading.** Along with ELA teachers, science and social studies teachers are also trained incorporating literacy skills into their classes.
- + **Hiring Reading Interventionists to provide targeted reading support.** The interventionists are able to work with students as needed to build their foundational skills, such as word decoding and vocabulary.
- + **Development of a Reading Intervention Block.** An additional development at Blackburn Middle School is the creation of a credit-bearing board for students in need of additional support to build literacy skills.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Lessons learned from our recent survey and the lived experiences of Mississippi educators offer a clear roadmap for building upon our state's success in reading growth. To ensure this success continues beyond the early years, we propose the following four strategic actions.

1. Policymakers should require all K-8 teachers, including science and social studies teachers, to be trained in the science of reading.

To sustain literacy growth, Mississippi must expand science of reading training to upper-elementary, middle school, and content-area teachers (such as Science and Social Studies). Implementing cross-content literacy requirements ensures that students receive consistent decoding support and skill-building in every subject. We recommend the Legislature and MDE mandate and fund these trainings for all districts by the 2028-29 school year. Furthermore, MDE should collaborate with Institutions of Higher Learning and other educator prep programs to ensure that aspiring teachers also receive this foundational training.

2. Legislators should provide state funding for the hiring of Reading Interventionists to provide targeted reading support.

Mississippi should allocate dedicated funding for reading interventionists who deliver evidence-based, targeted literacy instruction to students identified through screening and assessment. This strengthens early literacy outcomes and reduces the need for later remediation and supports statewide reading proficiency goals by ensuring students receive timely, specialized support. These professionals are able to work with students as needed to build their foundational skills, such as word decoding and vocabulary.

3. MDE should support, incentivize, and collect data on district use of curricula and high-quality instructional materials that are rooted in the science of reading.

The Mississippi Department of Education should develop a curated list of high-quality curricula and instructional materials (HQIM) rooted in the science 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. MDE should collect data on what curriculum teachers are using in each district and publish a report each year on how districts using each curriculum are performing in reading proficiency, including student subgroups.

4. Policymakers should require the creation of a credit-bearing Reading Intervention Block to provide additional support for students.

Establishing a Reading Intervention Block ensures that students receive consistent, high-quality literacy support integrated directly into their school day. This structured approach would allow Interventionists to deliver evidence-based, small-group instruction tailored to specific foundational gaps, such as word decoding and vocabulary. By formalizing this block as a credit-bearing course, schools can prioritize the mastery of these essential skills while ensuring students remain academically engaged and on track for promotion.

Implementing this intervention block serves as a more effective and supportive alternative to an "8th grade reading gate" literacy exam. A major concern about establishing this promotion requirement is the [greater likelihood](#) that students retained in the 8th grade may ultimately drop out. To provide the most effective support for adolescent reading, we call for a strategy that focuses on proactive, specialized support that addresses literacy needs without the negative social and academic consequences of a high-stakes gate.

Conclusion

Mississippi has rightfully earned its reputation as a national leader in literacy, setting a gold standard for how evidence-based instruction can transform student outcomes, but the work of the "Mississippi Marathon" is not yet complete.

To maintain our competitive edge and ensure every student reaches their full potential, we must not take our foot off the gas. Instead, we must act now to train all K-8 teachers in the science of reading, invest in specialized reading interventionists, support districts with HQIM, and require proactive support for struggling readers. While we led the charge in elementary literacy, other states are now aggressively investing in adolescent literacy and risk leaving us behind if we fail to expand our efforts into the upper grades. Now is the time to act, fulfilling our promise to every student in the state.

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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. In pursuing this mission, Teach Plus is guided by the Student Opportunity Mandate: All students should have the opportunity to achieve their potential in an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success.

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