



**Written testimony of Rachael Garnick before the Senate Majority Policy Committee**  
**Monday, January 12, 2026**  
**Douglassville, PA**

Chair Argall, Senator Pennycuik, and esteemed members of the Senate Majority Policy Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Rachael Garnick, and I serve as the Pennsylvania Coalition Manager for Teach Plus, where I lead the Pennsylvania Literacy Coalition, a statewide initiative to advance evidence-based literacy policy and practice. I am also a former elementary and special education teacher, a former English as a Foreign Language educator, and an avid, lifelong reader.

I am here as someone who has experienced the joy and freedom that reading can bring; as an educator who has seen the academic and emotional harm that occurs when children are not taught to read; and as a policy leader who understands that while Pennsylvania has taken meaningful steps forward, legislation alone will not deliver improved reading performance.

Pennsylvania no longer needs to debate *whether* literacy matters. The research is settled. The moral case is clear. And this legislature has already acted. The question before us now is *how*: how we move from policy to practice, from good intentions to classroom-level impact, and from fragmented efforts to a coherent, statewide system that ensures every child learns to read.

### **What Is at Stake**

The evidence is unequivocal: reading proficiently by the end of third grade is one of the strongest predictors of long-term success. Children who read proficiently by that point are far more likely to succeed academically, graduate from high school, and pursue postsecondary education. Conversely, students who are not proficient readers by third grade are four times more likely to fail to graduate from high school, with even higher risks for students who are Black, Hispanic, multilingual learners, or from low-income backgrounds.<sup>1</sup>

Functional illiteracy is also associated with lower lifetime earnings, higher unemployment, poorer health and psychological well-being, and higher rates of incarceration—costs that extend well beyond the individual to the broader economy.<sup>2</sup> In Pennsylvania alone, low literacy costs the Commonwealth an estimated \$113 billion in lost annual earnings each year.<sup>3</sup> When children are not taught to read effectively, they become adults who struggle to navigate the systems that shape daily life, from employment and healthcare to civic participation and family stability. To illustrate the scope of the challenge in Pennsylvania, 63% of adults in Carbon County, 40% in Montgomery County, and 69% in Philadelphia County struggle with reading<sup>4</sup>, underscoring the scale and urgency of this challenge.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation (2011). [Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation](#).

<sup>2</sup> Mulcahy, E., & Bernardes, E. (2019). [The relationship between reading age, education and life outcomes](#).

<sup>3</sup> The Pennsylvania Literacy Coalition & Teach Plus (2025). [The Economic Cost of Low Literacy in PA Data Sheets](#).

<sup>4</sup> “Struggle with reading” denotes adults scoring at Level 2 or below on U.S. Department of Education adult literacy assessments, where Level 2 reflects below-proficient literacy and Level 1 reflects functional illiteracy.

<sup>5</sup> National Center for Education Statistics Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (2023). [U.S. Skills Map: State and County Indicators of Adult Literacy and Numeracy](#). <https://www.paliteracy.org/data-resources>

These outcomes are not inevitable. They are the predictable result of instructional practices, preparation pathways, and systems that have failed to equip educators with the training, tools, and evidence-based approaches required to teach all children to read. And systems—when we choose to—can be changed.

At its core, reading is not just an academic skill; it is a matter of human dignity, agency, and freedom. Enslaved people were historically forbidden from learning to read precisely because literacy offered a path to independence and resistance.<sup>6</sup> Frederick Douglass famously wrote, “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.” That truth remains just as powerful today.

Beyond academics and economics, reading shapes who children become. Research shows that students who are supported to read independently not only improve academically, but also develop stronger empathy, moral reasoning, self-regulation, and relationships.<sup>7</sup> This is why literacy is not merely an education issue; it is a civil rights issue, an economic issue, and a moral imperative.

### **My Story: From Reader to Teacher to Advocate**

For me, reading has always been central to my identity. My grandmother taught me to read before I entered kindergarten, and I quickly became a voracious reader. Books expanded my vocabulary, fueled my curiosity, and helped me see beyond my immediate surroundings. Much of my academic success—and my love of learning—can be traced back to reading. But as a classroom teacher, I came to understand the other side of that story.

When I entered the classroom as a new elementary teacher, it quickly became clear that I did not know how to teach children to read. In fact, I realized I had never been taught how to effectively teach reading at all. Like many educators, I was trained in—and encouraged to use—now-disproven approaches aligned with balanced literacy, including three-cueing and predictable texts. I was taught to help students “read” by guessing words from pictures, patterns, and context, rather than by teaching them how to decode written language.

For example, an early leveled book might follow a simple pattern: “I like dogs. I like cats. I like birds.” I was trained to teach students to memorize the pattern “I like,” then use the picture—and sometimes the first letter of a word—to guess the remaining text. These strategies appeared to work for a small number of students at first, but they quickly broke down as texts became more complex and predictable patterns and pictures disappeared. Students who relied on guessing had no tools to decode unfamiliar or multisyllabic words, and I had no idea how to teach them.

As a result, many of my students disengaged. Some acted out; others internalized a sense of failure. What appeared to be behavior problems were often desperate attempts to avoid exposing their inability to read. I saw firsthand how early reading difficulties fueled behavioral challenges—a pattern that is well documented in the research. Approximately 85% of juveniles who interact with the court system are functionally illiterate, as are roughly 60% of incarcerated adults.<sup>8</sup> What I was witnessing in my classroom was not an individual failure; it was a systemic one.

I entered the profession to open doors for children, not to watch them fall further behind. I worked long hours, followed my training, and did exactly what I had been taught—yet it was not enough. I felt like a failure as an educator. That deep discouragement underscored a hard truth: when teachers are not properly prepared to teach reading, it is not just students who fail. The system fails them both. I knew something was wrong and wanted to fix it, but I lacked the knowledge, training, and tools to do so.

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<sup>6</sup> National Museum of African American History & Culture (2023). [“Illegal to Read”](#)

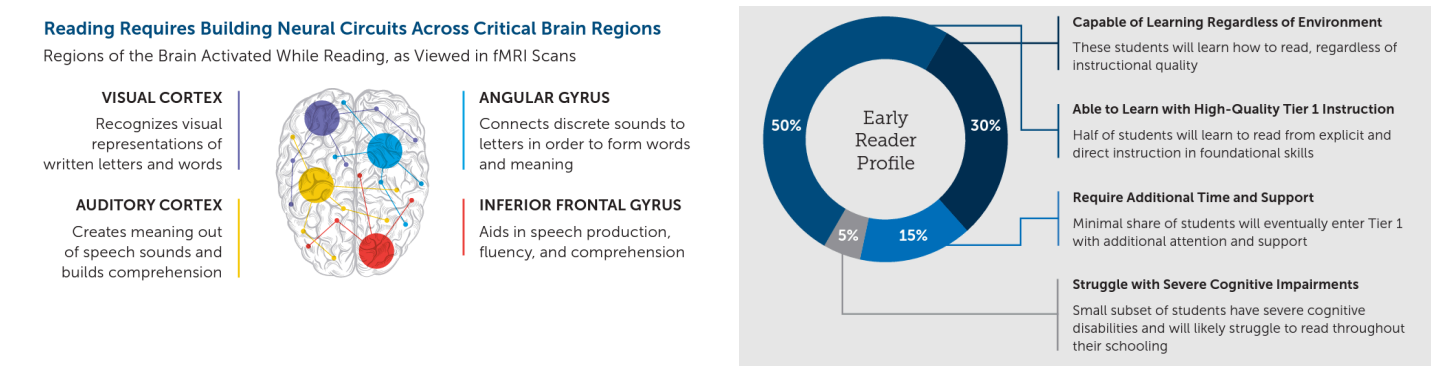
<sup>7</sup> Ivey, G. & Johnston, P. (2023). [Teens Choosing to Read: Fostering Social, Emotional, and Intellectual Growth Through Books.](#)

<sup>8</sup> Begin to Read (2023). [Literacy Statistics.](#)

Everything changed when my mentor teacher encouraged me to join her professional learning community focused on the science of reading. Through research, collaboration, and exposure to Emily Hanford’s *Sold a Story*, I learned that reading is not a natural process. While humans are hardwired for spoken language, written language is a relatively recent invention that requires the brain to build new neural pathways connecting visual symbols to spoken words. Advances in neuroscience now clearly show how children learn to read and what instruction makes that possible.

I learned that roughly 95% of children, regardless of background, are cognitively capable of learning to read when they receive direct, explicit instruction in foundational skills. About 30% of students will learn to read with minimal direct instruction, 50% with strong Tier I instruction, and 15% will require additional time and support. Only about 5% of students with severe cognitive disabilities will continue to struggle even with high-quality instruction.<sup>9</sup> Yet current proficiency rates make clear that most students are not currently receiving the instruction needed to reach anything close to universal literacy.

I also learned that the science of reading is not just about phonics—though phonics is often neglected—but about a constellation of skills that must be taught intentionally and coherently: phonological awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, background knowledge, and comprehension.



Images from EAB (2022). [Narrowing the Third-Grade Reading Gap: Embracing the Science of Reading](#). Pages 7 & 18.



Image from [What Is the Simple View of Reading?](#)

Image from [What Is the Reading Rope?](#)

<sup>9</sup> EAB (2022). [Narrowing the Third-Grade Reading Gap: Embracing the Science of Reading](#). Pages 6-7.

Most importantly, I received sustained, classroom-embedded coaching. With that support, my practice changed gradually but meaningfully. My mentor teacher regularly observed my lessons, provided targeted feedback, helped me reflect on specific instructional moves, and worked with me to analyze student data so I could adjust my approach and differentiate instruction in real time. By my final year teaching first grade, nearly 90% of my students met or exceeded grade-level reading benchmarks, up from just 39% earlier in my career.

That experience taught me two enduring lessons: teaching children to decode does not diminish the joy of reading—it unlocks it; and professional development alone is insufficient. Coaching, aligned instructional materials, and clear expectations are essential. Teachers are not the problem. The systems that prepare and support them are.

## Pennsylvania's Current Reality

Today, only 33% of Pennsylvania fourth graders read proficiently on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as the Nation's Report Card. While the Commonwealth's average fourth-grade reading score of 216 is near the national average, it represents a sharp decline from a high of 227 in 2015 and reflects a troubling regression over the past two decades.<sup>10</sup> Research by Dr. Ed Fuller of Penn State University shows that Pennsylvania has the largest racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps in the nation on the NAEP, gaps driven in part by long-standing inequities in educational funding and access to opportunity.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, Mississippi demonstrates what is possible. Between 2013 and 2024, Mississippi's fourth-grade NAEP reading scores increased faster than any other state in the country, moving from among the lowest-performing states to on par with—and in some measures exceeding—the national average. In 2024, Mississippi's fourth-graders earned an average NAEP reading score of 219, above the national average of 214, and 32% scored at or above the NAEP Proficient level, representing sustained improvement over previous decades. After adjusting for differences in student demographics—including age, race and ethnicity, special education status, income, and English language learner status—the Urban Institute found that Mississippi ranked as the highest-performing state in fourth-grade reading in 2024.<sup>12</sup> These gains have drawn national attention and are often referred to as the “Mississippi miracle.”

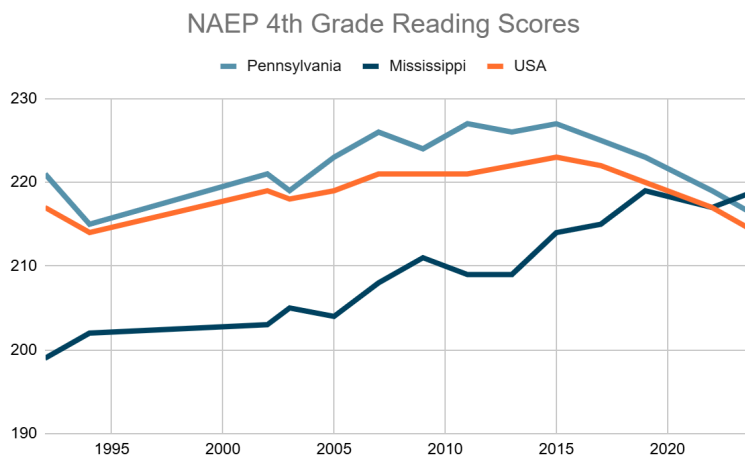


Image Source: Created by Rachael Garnick based on NAEP data

<sup>10</sup> The Nation's Report Card (2024). [2024 Reading State Snapshot Report: Pennsylvania Grade 4 Public Schools](#).

<sup>11</sup> Fuller, E.J. (2020). [Fourth Grade Achievement Gaps on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in Pennsylvania in 2019](#).

<sup>12</sup> Urban Institute (2024). [States' Demographically Adjusted Performance on the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress](#)

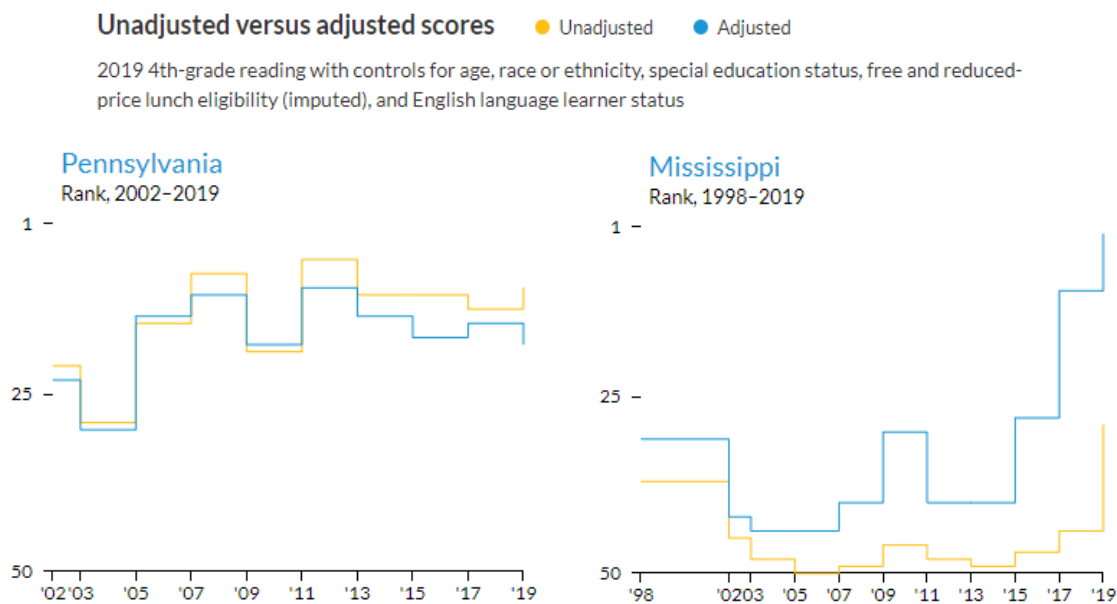


Image Source: [America's Gradebook: How Does Your State Stack Up?](#)

Experts attribute Mississippi's success not to a single policy, but to a coherent set of aligned reforms implemented over time, including:

- **Teacher preparation:** Requiring educator preparation programs to align coursework and instruction with the science of reading
- **Teacher licensure:** Requiring pre-service and, in some cases, in-service teachers to pass a licensure exam demonstrating knowledge of evidence-based reading instruction
- **Professional development and coaching:** Providing sustained training and instructional coaching grounded in reading science
- **Assessment:** Using science-of-reading-aligned assessments to identify struggling readers and monitor progress
- **Curriculum:** Adopting high-quality instructional materials aligned to evidence-based practices
- **Instruction and intervention:** Requiring specific, research-based instructional methods and targeted interventions for students who need additional support.<sup>13</sup>

Pennsylvania has taken meaningful steps in a similar direction. These include revisions to Chapter 49 requiring educator preparation programs and school districts to begin training teachers in structured literacy;<sup>14</sup> the Pennsylvania Department of Education's adoption of structured literacy competencies aligned to the International Dyslexia Association's *Knowledge & Practice Standards*;<sup>15</sup> Act 55 (the 2022-23 school code), which included a new optional pilot program to train teachers and instructional coaches in structured literacy;<sup>16</sup> Act 135 of 2024, which established lists of evidence-based materials and assessments;<sup>17</sup> and Act 47 (the 2025-26 school code), which requires evidence-based curriculum, educator training, universal K-3 literacy screening, and literacy interventions for struggling readers.<sup>18</sup>

These actions matter, and they set an important direction. But direction alone does not change instruction.

<sup>13</sup> Schwartz, S. (2023). [Which States Have Passed 'Science of Reading' Laws? What's in Them?](#)

<sup>14</sup> Pennsylvania Bulletin (2022). [22 Pa. Code Ch. 49: Certification of Professional Personnel](#). Search text for "structured literacy" to find the relevant language.

<sup>15</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education (2022). [Structured Literacy \(SL\) Program Framework Guidelines](#).

<sup>16</sup> Pennsylvania General Assembly (2022). [Public School Code of 1949 - Omnibus Amendments. Act. of Jul. 8, 2022. P.L. 620, No. 55](#). Section 9 is the relevant section.

<sup>17</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education (2024). [Structured Literacy \(SL\) Act 135 of 2024](#).

<sup>18</sup> Pennsylvania General Assembly (2025). [Public School Code of 1949 - Omnibus Amendments. Act. of Nov. 12, 2025, P.L. 30, No. 14](#). Section 36 is the relevant section.



Under Act 135 of 2024, instructional materials and professional development lists were compiled from out-of-state clearinghouses without formal PDE vetting. Educators and experts have raised concerns about clarity, quality, and alignment to Pennsylvania's standards, leaving districts—many already overstretched—to determine what is truly aligned and effective. This approach risks uneven adoption, inefficient spending, and missed opportunities for economies of scale. Rather than leveraging Pennsylvania's purchasing power to support a small number of high-quality, aligned programs statewide, districts are left to navigate the market independently, often at significant cost.

Compounding this challenge, while the General Assembly has allocated \$10 million for literacy in the 2025-26 budget, the grant program intended to offset the full cost of adopting new literacy materials has not been fully funded.<sup>19</sup> As a result, many districts—particularly small, rural, and under-resourced ones—lack the support needed to implement these requirements effectively. This gap further widens the distance between policy intent and classroom reality.

Improving literacy outcomes will require more than passing policy; it will require a shift in how Pennsylvania approaches leadership. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states have greater autonomy—and responsibility—than ever before.<sup>20</sup> That responsibility is only increasing as federal education infrastructure is scaled back and states are asked to lead more decisively. Compliance alone is not enough. Meaningful improvement demands a state department of education that does not simply administer policy, but actively guides, aligns, and supports the system from preparation to practice. This means moving from complete deference to local control toward shared responsibility for ensuring every child has access to effective reading instruction. Without a coordinated, statewide implementation strategy, Pennsylvania risks repeating a familiar pattern: uneven adoption, variable quality, and limited impact, particularly in under-resourced districts.

Despite clear evidence about what works, Pennsylvania's educator preparation and licensure systems remain misaligned with the science of reading. As a result, many new teachers continue to enter classrooms without the knowledge and skills required to teach children how to read effectively. This disconnect is not theoretical; it directly shapes instructional practice. When teachers are not taught how reading develops in the brain or how to provide systematic, explicit instruction in foundational skills, they are left to rely on outdated approaches that do not work for most students. This was my own experience as a new teacher, and it remains the experience of too many educators across the Commonwealth today.

Research from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) reinforces this concern. Pennsylvania's current elementary certification exam has been rated *weak* in its alignment to the science of reading.<sup>21</sup> While it touches on some core concepts, it also reflects outdated instructional approaches and allows reading knowledge to be combined with unrelated subject areas. As a result, candidates can pass the exam without ever demonstrating true competency in how to teach reading. Even where preparation standards exist, program quality varies widely without a strong licensure check. The predictable outcome is a workforce of well-intentioned educators who must be retrained after hiring, placing unnecessary strain on districts and, most importantly, delaying effective instruction for students.

Pennsylvania's outcomes are not the result of laziness, indifference, or lack of effort by educators. They are the predictable result of a fragmented system that has not consistently equipped teachers with the preparation, materials, coaching, and leadership needed to deliver effective reading instruction.

These outcomes are deeply concerning, but they are not inevitable. Pennsylvania's literacy challenges are neither unique nor permanent. Other states, facing similar demographics and constraints, have demonstrated that sustained, statewide improvement is possible when literacy reform is treated as systems work rather than a series of disconnected initiatives.

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<sup>19</sup> Redelmeier, R. (2025). [Pennsylvania will require schools to use evidence-based reading curriculum](#). Chalkbeat.

<sup>20</sup> Weiss, J., & McGuinn, P. (2016). [States as Change Agents Under ESSA](#). Kappan.

<sup>21</sup> Ellis, C., Holston, S., Drake, G., Putman, H., Swisher, A., & Peske, H. (2023). [Teacher Prep Review: Strengthening elementary reading instruction](#). National Council on Teacher Quality.

## Lessons from Other States

Mississippi's dramatic gains in fourth-grade reading did not result from a single policy or program. They were the product of a coherent, sustained, statewide strategy that aligned every major lever influencing reading instruction—from preparation and licensure to curriculum, assessment, professional learning, and accountability.

What distinguished Mississippi was not just what it aligned, but how it implemented that alignment.

Critically, Mississippi invested in internal capacity at its state education agency. It hired dedicated literacy leaders, built cross-functional implementation teams, and treated literacy reform as long-term human work, not a compliance exercise. Implementation was not optional, episodic, or left entirely to local interpretation. It was supported, monitored, and continuously improved.

Other states have followed similar paths with comparable results, offering concrete models for how to build statewide capacity. For example, North Carolina's Office of Early Learning funds full-time Early Literacy Specialists assigned to every district, focused on coaching, capacity-building, and systems support (not evaluation).<sup>22</sup> Alabama built a layered coaching system, pairing Local Reading Specialists in K-3 schools with Regional and State Literacy Specialists, guided by a statewide Coaching Framework to define expectations, ensure consistency, and monitor impact.<sup>23</sup> Maryland expanded capacity through a public-private partnership, launching a multi-million-dollar initiative to deliver professional learning at scale to tens of thousands of educators and leaders.<sup>24</sup>

The lesson from these states is clear: literacy improvement does not come from admiring the research. It comes from systems that live the research. When states align preparation, licensure, materials, assessment, professional learning, and leadership around a shared vision of how children learn to read—and when they fund and staff implementation accordingly—student outcomes follow.

Importantly, these lessons are not limited to other states. Evidence from within Pennsylvania itself shows that when districts apply the same principles—alignment, leadership, strong materials, and sustained support—student outcomes improve, even in high-poverty contexts.

## Proof Points from Pennsylvania

The urgency of literacy reform is not abstract, nor is the opportunity for progress. Across Pennsylvania's 67 counties, data and district experience reveal both the scale of the challenge and the tangible benefits of acting decisively.

The Pennsylvania Literacy Coalition is currently conducting a *Proof Points* research project examining four diverse school districts—urban, suburban, and rural; large and small—that are serving high-poverty student populations. Despite statewide declines in reading outcomes, these districts have achieved modest but meaningful gains over time.

While this research is ongoing, several consistent themes have already emerged:

1. **District-wide buy-in and leadership:** Superintendents, principals, and central-office teams learned alongside teachers and acknowledged that many educators had never been fully equipped to teach reading using

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<sup>22</sup> North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2023). [Operation Polaris: Navigating Students Toward a Brighter Future](#).

<sup>23</sup> Mackey, D. E. G. (2020). [Alabama's Journey to Reading Success: The Alabama Literacy Act Implementation Guide](#). Alabama Achieves.

<sup>24</sup> Maryland State Department of Education. (2024). [MSDE Announces \\$6.85M Philanthropic Partnership to Increase Literacy Outcomes: Grant invests in high-quality professional learning grounded in the Science of Reading](#).

evidence-based approaches.

2. **A shift away from balanced literacy:** Districts moved away from leveled readers, three-cueing, and related practices, and toward universal screening, structured literacy-aligned materials, and clearer instructional expectations.
3. **Sustained professional development and coaching:** Districts invested in and committed to ongoing, job-embedded support—coaching, modeling, and teacher learning—rather than relying on one-time professional development.

These districts’ experiences reinforce what research and other states have shown: lasting improvement requires coherence across training, materials, assessment, and support. These districts succeed not through willpower, but because they built systems of support. Pennsylvania’s challenge is ensuring every district has access to that kind of infrastructure.

Taken together, Pennsylvania’s data, district experiences, and lessons from other states point to the same conclusion: improving literacy outcomes requires intentional, coordinated action at the state level. The question before the Commonwealth is no longer what works, but whether we will commit to how to make it work at scale.

### **What Pennsylvania Must Do Next: From Policy to Practice**

Translating evidence into outcomes requires leadership, alignment, and investment. To ensure that every Pennsylvania child has access to effective reading instruction, the Commonwealth must move beyond policy adoption toward deliberate, statewide implementation. The following recommendations outline the critical components of that effort.

#### *Recommendation 1: Fund the Work at the Scale Required*

Implementing the science of reading statewide requires sustained investment that matches the scale of the challenge. While the General Assembly allocated \$10 million for literacy in the Mobile Sciences, Mathematics, and Literacy line item in the 2025-26 budget, this represents only a fraction of what is needed.

Based on analyses of professional learning, instructional materials, coaching, assessment, and implementation infrastructure, we estimate that approximately \$100 million is required to fully and equitably implement evidence-based literacy practices across the Commonwealth.

This investment is modest relative to the return. Closing Pennsylvania’s literacy gap would unlock more than \$113 billion in annual earnings statewide, strengthen the workforce, reduce poverty, and lower long-term public costs associated with remediation, unemployment, special education, and incarceration. Literacy funding is not a short-term expense, it is a long-term economic strategy.

A statewide transition to evidence-based literacy instruction requires investment that ensures:

- Adoption of high-quality, evidence-based materials
- Statewide professional learning aligned to the science of reading
- Universal K-3 screening tools and data systems
- Ongoing, school-embedded coaching and technical assistance



Without adequate funding, implementation will remain uneven, placing the greatest burden on small, rural, and under-resourced districts. With sufficient investment, Pennsylvania can achieve economies of scale, reduce duplicative spending, and ensure that every child has access to effective reading instruction.

### *Recommendation 2: Invest in Coaching and Leadership Development*

Implementation is not technical work, it is human work. Even the strongest curriculum and professional development will fail without leaders who understand effective reading instruction and systems that support teachers as they change practice.

To ensure that policy translates into classroom impact, Pennsylvania must invest in:

- Training for school and district leaders so they understand the science of reading and can support implementation beyond compliance
- Sustained, job-embedded coaching that helps teachers turn new knowledge into daily instructional practice
- Clear instructional expectations so educators are not left navigating conflicting messages or initiatives

Intermediate Units (IUs) are uniquely positioned to serve as regional hubs for this work. They already provide professional learning, coaching, and technical assistance and maintain trusted relationships with districts. With stable funding, clear expectations, and alignment to a statewide strategy, IUs can form the backbone of Pennsylvania's literacy implementation infrastructure—ensuring consistent support regardless of district size or capacity.

When teachers are supported through coaching—not just one-time training—and when leaders are equipped to recognize and reinforce high-quality instruction, implementation becomes durable, equitable, and effective.

### *Recommendation 3: Ensure Coherence Across Preparation, Training, Curriculum, and Assessment*

The highest-leverage action a state can take is ensuring coherence across what teachers are taught, what they teach, and how students are assessed.

This includes:

- Strengthening teacher licensure exams so candidates must demonstrate mastery of science-of-reading-aligned instruction
- Holding educator preparation programs accountable for preparing teachers who can teach reading effectively from day one
- Providing clearer, more directive guidance on high-quality instructional materials and assessments aligned to evidence

A weak licensure exam allows teachers to enter classrooms unprepared, and it is the children who pay the price. Together, these steps ensure that teachers enter the profession prepared, supported, and equipped to deliver effective reading instruction.

### *Recommendation 4: Empower PDE to Lead and Coordinate Statewide Literacy Reform*

Policy does not implement itself. To translate Pennsylvania’s literacy policies into classroom practice, the Pennsylvania Department of Education must be positioned not only as a policy administrator, but as a statewide leader and coordinator of implementation.

This requires PDE to:

- Build internal implementation capacity, including appointing a State Literacy Director and establishing a cross-functional literacy team spanning curriculum, assessment, educator preparation, special education, and multilingual learner supports
- Serve as a statewide convener, aligning school districts, educator preparation programs, Intermediate Units (IUs), PaTTAN, and external partners around a shared literacy strategy
- Coordinate delivery of professional learning, coaching, and technical assistance, leveraging IUs and PaTTAN as regional implementation hubs
- Provide clear expectations and guidance, reducing fragmentation and conflicting messages across the system

Much of this infrastructure already exists. What is missing is intentional alignment, authority, and sustained focus. States that have improved reading outcomes invested in people first and treated implementation as long-term systems work—not a compliance exercise. Without this leadership and coordination, even the strongest literacy policies will fail to reach classrooms. Pennsylvania must do the same.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, literacy reform is not about programs, frameworks, or compliance. It is about children and educators whose futures are shaped—often irreversibly—by whether they receive the instruction and support they need.

I often think about a student I taught named Jayden. He was in my classroom early in my career, before I had learned how to teach reading using explicit, systematic instruction grounded in the science of reading. I worked long hours, cared deeply, and did what I had been trained to do. But it was not what he needed. I pushed him along without being able to give him true access to reading, and that failure still haunts me.

Jayden was known for his disruptive behavior. He argued with peers, lashed out in frustration, and spent far too much time outside the classroom. What many adults interpreted as defiance was, in reality, shame. Jayden could not read, and he had already begun to believe that no one would be able to help him. At seven years old, he was already losing hope in school and in himself. And Jayden was not the only one. There were many students like him in my early years of teaching, and I know that without effective reading instruction, their struggles did not end when they left my classroom.

Later in my career, after I finally received the training, coaching, and tools I had always lacked, I saw what was possible. I watched students with similar challenges learn to read, regulate their behavior, and regain confidence—not because they changed, but because the instruction did. The difference was not the children. The difference was preparation.

There are far too many Jaydens across Pennsylvania, and too many teachers, like I once was, who are asked to do the impossible without the knowledge or support required. Pennsylvania has taken important steps forward. Now it must commit to implementation with the urgency, leadership, and investment this moment demands, so that no child’s future is determined by whether the system was prepared to teach them to read.