

Building Successful Readers Begins at Birth: Policy Recommendations for Leveraging Early Childhood Care and Education in Support of State Reading Achievement Goals

Summary

The Minnesota legislature took important steps in two seemingly unrelated areas in 2023: early childhood systems development and reform of K-12 reading instruction. If a closer look is taken though, these two achievements can be linked to the benefit of both areas. Policy changes and investments to bolster early literacy for children ages birth to five will strengthen the sector in ways that support child outcomes, and those improved outcomes will translate into children having the literacy foundation necessary to accomplish K-12 reading reform goals. This paper lays out the rationale for making this linkage and concludes with a set of policy recommendations that can be taken in the early care and education space to align those systems and efforts in support of K-12 reading goals.

Recommendations

- Review and Revise Early Literacy Standards
- Identify Curriculum & Assessment Tools Aligned to the Science of Reading
- Explicitly Incorporate Early Literacy into Parent Aware Framework
- Review and Revise Knowledge and Competency Framework
- Develop Systems for Individualized Supports
- Leverage Strengths, Innovate on Family Engagement
- Establish Accountability and Continuous Improvement Mechanisms

Introduction: 2023 Session Creates Opportunity

Through continued innovation across a variety of aspects of the state's emerging early childhood system policymakers, advocates, early educators, and service delivery intermediaries are working together toward the goal of consistently providing developmentally appropriate support for both academic and social-emotional outcomes for children ages birth to five, regardless of their background or where they live in the state. There is little remaining debate that the skills formed during this period are the foundation that a child depends on for success as they move first through further schooling in



the K-12 system and, later, into adulthood or that there is a public role in assuring those skills are developed.

As a result, the number of Minnesota children enrolled in early care and education programs continues to expand with the Minnesota Legislature doubling down on policy and funding for early care and education, particularly during the 2023 session. Significant investments and policy changes were made to strengthen and expand Early Learning Scholarships, Child Care Assistance, Head Start, school based PreK programs, the early childhood workforce, IT infrastructure, and more. As this system is developed and continuously improved, deliberate effort is needed to maintain our focus on achieving better and more equitable outcomes for all children.

The 2023 legislature also passed the Minnesota Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act (“The READ Act”), which begins with the following goal: “The legislature seeks to have every child reading at or above grade level every year, beginning in kindergarten and to support multilingual learners and students receiving special education services in achieving their individualized reading goals”. While it may not have been the Legislature’s intent, the strengthening of the early learning system and the creation of the Minnesota READ Act have the potential to complement each other toward the goal of having all children starting kindergarten with a strong literacy foundation that can be built on during their early elementary years.

Early Literacy Development: Building a Foundation

If a child is to leave kindergarten with the necessary skills to be “at or above grade level” in reading, they will need to have had experiences prior to that time that provide the necessary foundation. While that looks very different for infants than it does at age three years or at five years, developmentally appropriate experiences, starting at birth, are essential. And there is a growing understanding that those experiences include both intentional support toward the development of specific skills, for example skills related to phonics and the alphabet that help with later word recognition, as well as opportunities to build vocabulary and develop the background knowledge necessary for language comprehension. For example, each time an infant hears speech or songs, their brain learns rules that eventually generalize to later reading skills. For example, a baby hearing a caregiver sing “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, how I wonder what you are” over and over builds the foundation for phonemic awareness (star/are, high/sky). Infants don’t need instruction, but they reap great benefit from intentional interactions.

Despite all that is known about how developmentally appropriate approaches to supporting children’s development in their early years, far too many disparities in developmental skills appear long before kindergarten entry. To increase the odds that our state achieves its important READ Act goal, Minnesota clearly needs strategies that start early, are based in reliable scientific evidence, and are inclusive of multilingual learners and students receiving special education services.

The good news is we have great guidance for these efforts. In recent decades, we have gained substantial knowledge about ways in which young children’s early development creates a strong beginning for later learning and achievement, and for better overall school outcomes (Cabell et al., 2023). We benefit from expanding practical guidance and evidence-based practices about how to support and assess these essential early skills and competencies (Diamond et al., 2013; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). And we have consensus on the research that demonstrates how early childhood classroom and instructional practices can provide opportunities for young children to learn these skills using both child- and teacher-led activities (National Institute for Literacy, 2008).

Intersection With the READ Act

While we have made great advances in our knowledge and practices for early education, we have simultaneously faced continued concern about poor academic outcomes and evidence of persistent disparities across groups, especially in reading. These outcomes are particularly troubling for Minnesota. According to the most recent data from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (2022), only 30% of Minnesota students performed at or above the NAEP Proficient level, down from 36% proficient in 1998 and 34% before the pandemic (2019). The gaps are even more troubling when disaggregated by race and ethnicity, with Black students’ average scores 32 points lower and Hispanic students 27 points lower than white students (2022). Proficiency gaps between income groups in Minnesota are nearly as stark, with average scores for students eligible for Free/Reduced Price Lunch 26 points lower than their peers from families not eligible for the program.

However, something of a national movement is underway; buoyed by [recent media reports](#) about how (and how *not*) to teach reading, advocates, legislators, and educators are increasingly turning to the “science of reading” for guidance. This science of reading can be described as “a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research and reading...[that] has culminated in a preponderance of evidence to inform how proficient reading and writing develop; why some have difficulty; and how we can most effectively assess and teach and, therefore, improve student outcomes through prevention of and intervention for reading difficulties.” (The Reading League, 2022)

The Minnesota READ Act, along with similar legislation in at least 17 states and the District of Columbia (Education Commission of the States, 2023) responds to this increased attention to the science of reading. Minnesota has taken an approach like that taken in other states by passing legislation focused on improving reading instruction via several levers, including the use of evidence-based instruction; professional development; student assessment; and intentional, targeted intervention.

This is a positive development in support of children’s achievement, however a review of the reading-related statutes in Minnesota and six other states revealed only cursory mention of how the science of reading should be applied in the birth to five years. While several of the statutes, including Minnesota’s, include language applying science of reading to “PreK”, those references focus only on

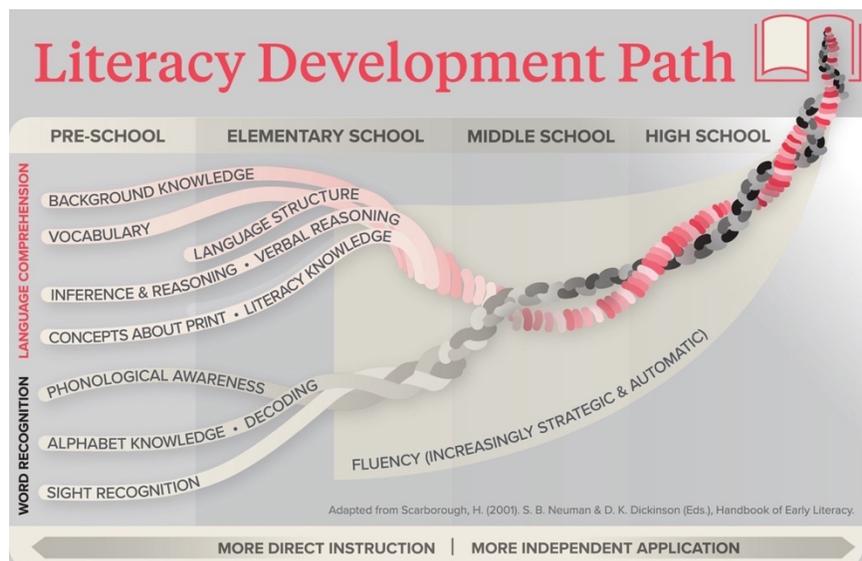
programs for four-year-olds run directly through school districts, rather than on robustly addressing how the science applies to children from birth to kindergarten entry in the myriad of early care and education programs that serve them.

Considering all of this, Minnesota policymakers must ask themselves the following question: How can Minnesota provide early experiences and services that align with efforts in K-12 and contribute to improved outcomes in early elementary school and beyond?

Aligning Early Childhood and Early Elementary School Development and Learning

In 2001, Hollis Scarborough provided a useful metaphor for a child’s path to reading proficiency. Scarborough’s Rope describes two “strands” of development – word recognition and language comprehension – that start somewhat apart but over time and with intentional guidance (early childhood term) or instruction (K-12 term) become integrated as fluent and skillful reading. Scarborough’s Rope is a useful tool for thinking about and describing the elementary school experience of learning to read, and it provides a basis for thinking about and beginning to design early childhood development that supports this later pathway.

The graphic below (Renaissance Learning, 2023) builds on Scarborough’s Rope, again showing separate threads contributing to the two major strands and coming together to produce skillful reading; in this version, however, many of the separate strands present in kindergarten now have components beginning long before kindergarten. Importantly, these early childhood elements both emphasize the developmental progression of these skills beginning before kindergarten entry, and points to areas of child development and the experiences that contribute to considered in our early care and education programs.



While this illustration leaves out the youngest children, we know that the experiences of infants and toddlers are also critically important. Examples of these practices are many. For instance, we know that oral language development is an essential contributor to later reading proficiency (Scarborough, 2001) and that this language development comes about through children’s interactions and experiences beginning in the first months of life (e.g., Fernald & Weisleder, 2011; Hart & Risley, 1995, 1999). We also know that adults and children reading books together – both reading the text and using stories as “jumping off spots” for more informal interaction – helps children grow their language while they learn to hear and manipulate the sounds of words, and start to learn the letters that help make those sounds (Hindman et al., 2014; Lefebvre et al., 2011; Neuman & Kaefer, 2018; Piasta et al., 2020; Stadler & McEvoy, 2003; Ziolkowski & Goldstein, 2008).

Moving to Action: Policy Recommendations

The READ Act framework offers a roadmap to Minnesota policymakers for aligning K-12 reading efforts with our early childhood systems. Here a proposed overarching goal is followed by a set of specific actions that policymakers can take to ensure children's experiences in their early years build a foundation for later reading. (Note the specific actions recommended here also align with the levers included in the READ Act.)

Goal: Parents and caregivers are engaged and supported as indispensable partners in literacy development, and early care and education programs, across setting type and age group, offer strong literacy components, including specialized supports for multilingual learners and children with special needs.

Review and Revise Early Literacy Standards

In Minnesota, the [Early Childhood Indicators of Progress](#) (ECIPs) set “a shared set of expectations of what children can know and do” because those shared expectations are “necessary to build successful early childhood programs and supports.” ([Minnesota Department of Education](#)). The ECIPs help early educators shape their work with young children, provide a framework for our state’s quality improvement efforts, and, importantly, align with K-12 standards. A review of the ECIPs is currently underway through the Minnesota Department of Education, and it is crucial that the review process incorporate the science of reading and align with updated K-12 reading standards, in a developmentally appropriate and relevant way.

Explicitly Incorporate Early Literacy into Parent Aware Framework

The ECIPs are intended to help early learning programs plan and implement their curriculum, instruction, and assessments. Parent Aware, Minnesota’s quality rating and improvement system, incorporates the ECIPs into the Parent Aware quality standards and indicators, which serve as a quality improvement roadmap for early care and education providers across settings. A full review and revision of Parent Aware is underway and scheduled to be completed by December 2024. As part of

this effort, Parent Aware should incorporate early literacy related standards and indicators at every star level and across standards as applicable.

Identify Curriculum & Assessment Tools Aligned to the Science of Reading

In the current Parent Aware standards for Teaching and Relationships with Children, a program is rated based on how well it “plans and implements developmentally appropriate learning experiences using a curriculum or bundle of curricula that cover all of the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIP) child development domains.” Parent Aware maintains a list of [curricula](#) and [assessment tools](#) that meet the Parent Aware standards, and to achieve a four-star rating, a program must use a curriculum from that list, and must assess children at least twice per year using an approved assessment. A comprehensive review of approved curriculum and assessment tools should be undertaken by a neutral entity and recommendations made with regards to curriculum and assessment tools that are aligned with the science of reading. Incentives and financial support should be made available to encourage the adoption of science of reading aligned curriculum and assessment tools by early care and education programs as well as training and coaching to support the adoption of the updated tools.

Review and Revise Knowledge and Competency Framework

The [Knowledge and Competency Framework](#), developed by the Minnesota Departments of Education, Human Services, and Health, provides a guide for what early childhood educators in Minnesota need to know and to be able to do. The Framework is inclusive of credit-based coursework, not-for-credit training, and relationship-based learning (mentoring, coaching, consultation). The Knowledge and Competency Framework includes a section on Building Foundations for Literacy and Numeracy. There are versions of the Framework for staff working with infants and toddlers as well as with preschool-aged children, and also for family child care providers. The framework has been recently revised to add components on addressing cultural responsibilities, trauma-informed care, and support for multilingual learners. The Framework should be further revised to enhance the content area related to literacy to reflect the science of reading more robustly in developmentally appropriate ways.

Require Professional Development, Incent Creation of Courses and Coaching Protocols

Ongoing professional development is a central component of the state’s early learning system. DEVELOP is the state’s system that supports all types of early educators in accessing and tracking available professional development. A search of available trainings using the keyword “literacy” resulted in 34 available courses (retrieved via [developtoolmn.org](#) on September 20, 2023), but there is currently no requirement that early educators take any of those courses, nor that those courses align with the science of reading, as it applies to young children. Professional development programs that focus on the key pillars of early literacy development and the science of reading need to be identified, or, in the case where they are not readily available, created with public support. Once available, these trainings should be both required and offered at no cost to early educators. In addition, the early education system already has a strong culture and infrastructure for providing relationship-based

professional development (i.e., coaching), which is another strong lever for improving developmentally appropriate practices to support the development of foundational literacy skills in young children. An investment should be made in developing and implementing training for the state’s corps of coaches so that they are prepared to support early educators in the implementation of the science of reading.

Develop Systems for Individualized Supports

Currently, the early childhood system does not include a corollary to Multitiered Systems of Support (MTSS), which are defined in the READ Act as a “systematic, continuous improvement framework for ensuring positive social, emotional, behavioral, developmental, and academic outcomes for every student.” While the specific practices in a MTSS are different for young children than they are for elementary-school-aged children, the concept applies equally well to young children, who also deserve instruction tailored to their individual needs. In fact, there are MTSS systems designed specifically for use in early education programs, with a focus on social-emotional and early literacy development. Pilots should be funded to explore how best to expand MTSS programs into our early childhood system, including how those programs support young children with special needs and multilingual learners.

Leverage Strengths, Innovate on Family Engagement

This is an area of strength for the early learning system, as parents of young children have much more contact with their child’s early learning program than is necessarily the case for elementary-school-aged children. There is currently a category in the Parent Aware framework focused on “Relationships with Families.” Those standards and indicators could be strengthened and expanded to include a focus on providing families with resources, materials, and education that allows them to support their young child’s literacy development in ways consistent with what is happening in their early learning programs. Minnesota also has the unique Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) program, established in statute, operating through Community Education programs, “based on the idea that parents provide their child’s first and most significant learning environment and parents are children’s first and most enduring teachers”. ECFE provides an opportunity to reach parents even when their child does not attend formal early education programs and should be enhanced to include a specific focus on providing participating families with skills and resources to support early literacy development in their young children, starting at birth. Additional methods for parent engagement should be piloted as well, including home visiting programs, evidence-based community literacy interventions, libraries, and enrichment programs for young children and their families.

Establish Accountability and Continuous Improvement Mechanisms

In 2023, the Minnesota Legislature made the state’s Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) mandatory for every child entering kindergarten in a district or charter school, beginning in the 2025-26 school year. The data from that assessment could be used as the basis for understanding how well our early education system is working to provide children with the necessary preliteracy skills prior to kindergarten entry.

In addition to a systems level view, Minnesota needs a strong, intentional system for continuous improvement at the program level. In 2018, the Office of the Legislative Auditor's report on Minnesota's Early Childhood programs recommended:

The Legislature should consider requiring assessments of school readiness for all children who complete education-related early childhood programs. This is important if Minnesota is to know whether children completing programs are prepared for school. Program providers would have to use state-approved assessment tools, and they would have to report results to MDE, if statewide results remain a goal.

If Minnesota were to implement this recommendation and have ECE programs assess children at the point when they are leaving their program to enter kindergarten, and if care were taken to ensure the assessment used was based in the science of reading, those aggregate data could be used by the ECE individual programs for purposes of continuously improving their approach and resources for building pre-literacy skills in the young children they serve. Those efforts could be further supported by the state, if used to target resources for further skill development for teachers, as well as to provide the programs with needed materials, including evidence-based curricula and assessment tools.