

LEADING WITH LITERACY

a toolkit for parents navigating
early grade literacy in kansas city schools



OUR SHARED COMMITMENT

Since 1999, I have had the privilege of teaching literacy skills grounded in the science of reading to students with language-based learning differences at Horizon Academy, the only school of its kind in the Kansas City area dedicated to empowering students with specific learning disabilities to become competent, confident readers and learners. Since 2015, I have also had the honor of serving as Head of School at Horizon Academy.

Over the past decade, we have refined our literacy instruction using the Orton-Gillingham Approach and have come to a powerful realization—one that special educators have known for a while: what works for students with dyslexia works for all students. Evidence-based, structured, and multisensory methods benefit every learner. This principle lies at the core of Structured Literacy, the broader educational framework that guides our work. Through this journey, I have come to deeply appreciate Dr. Louisa Moats' insight: teaching reading is rocket science.

Unlike rocket scientists, who spend years mastering complex calculations to launch a human into space, many preservice teachers receive limited or outdated preparation for teaching reading and spelling. The consequences are heartbreaking. I have witnessed the emotional toll on students and families when capable, intelligent children are failed by poor literacy instruction—children who begin to feel inadequate, unintelligent, or even worthless. No child should ever feel that way, especially when decades of research on effective reading instruction are within our reach.

My hope is that Kansas City parents will feel empowered by the information in this toolkit, compiled by our Fellow of the Orton-Gillingham Academy, Gabi Guillory Welsh. With the right questions to ask, the key signals to recognize and avoid, and trusted resources for guidance, parents can be powerful advocates for their children. Together, we can move Kansas City toward a future where every student has access to high-quality, scientifically based literacy instruction.

Vicki Asher

Head of School

Horizons Academy (KS)



Parents, you do not need to be literacy experts.

Let's begin with what this toolkit is not: it is not a how-to manual for teaching your child to read. Parents like you already feel immense pressure to prepare your children for kindergarten and beyond, reading bedtime stories, practicing ABCs, finding enriching activities, and trying to access quality early learning programs that are often too costly or out of reach. With all this pressure, you often feel like you're not doing enough.

After working alongside hundreds of Kansas City parents, we at PLTI-KC know the truth: you are doing everything within your power and capacity. You are doing enough. While you are your child's first teacher, you are not their only one—especially when it comes to reading.

As you will discover in this toolkit, teaching reading is complex work that requires years of training, which is why schools hire certified reading teachers. Your role as a parent is not to become a reading teacher; it's to hold your child's school accountable for **using proven, evidence-based literacy practices that benefit your child and every child.**

This toolkit honors the persistence and advocacy of PLTI parent leaders who have fought for their children, especially those with language or learning differences. Parents who knew something wasn't right and refused to give up.

They've worked extra shifts or taken a second job to afford tutoring. They've been told their child's reading delay is a result of speaking multiple languages when their gut says this can't be true. They've sought dyslexia testing, only to face high costs and long waitlists. They've asked for help and were told to "wait and see."

When families are forced to seek outside tutoring or literacy supports, the burden falls heaviest on those with the fewest resources. Even the most dedicated parents cannot compensate for systemic gaps in access to evidence-based reading instruction. This dynamic creates inequitable outcomes: children whose families can afford private support advance, while low-income families are left with fewer options and greater strain. Ensuring that all children learn to read well within their public schools is both an equity issue and an economic justice issue—and it is the only sustainable, system-wide solution.

So, alongside all the love and labor you already give your children, we invite you to take one more step: join us in advocacy. Together, we can ensure that every child, no matter their ZIP code, language, or learning difference, receives the literacy instruction and support they need to succeed.

You already have what it takes to lead change. Let's make sure every child becomes a confident reader.

Dr. Julie Hollalnd

Director

Parent Leadership Training Institute - KC



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This literacy toolkit was made possible through the support of School Smart KC. We are deeply grateful to Gabi Guillory Welsh with Horizon Academy for sharing her expertise and guidance, and to the many parents who continue to navigate the complex literacy landscape with courage and resilience.

We honor the families who raise and support children with dyslexia and other learning differences, whose persistence and advocacy remind us of the strength found in every household. Your lived experiences ground this work in both urgency and hope.

This toolkit reflects the power of parent leadership and empowerment, where parents use their voices, experiences, and insights to drive change. We believe that strong partnerships between parents and schools are essential for ensuring every child has the opportunity to thrive. This resource is one contribution to that shared effort, offered with gratitude to all who are working together toward better outcomes for children.

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INTRODUCTION

All children deserve high-quality, evidence-based literacy instruction. All adults deserve the chance to be readers. Yet for decades, systems have failed to provide this reality. Underfunded schools have often lacked the necessary resources to deliver effective instruction. Teacher preparation programs have not equipped educators with the best methods to teach reading. Leaders have often left parents out of the conversation. These challenges do not reflect individual shortcomings. They reflect systems that have chosen not to invest in what research has proven to work.

Teacher preparation programs teach different approaches to literacy instruction, and many new teachers start their careers without training in evidence-based practices. Once they enter classrooms, they must navigate a patchwork of curricula and mandates that prioritize short-term test scores or compliance over deep learning. Even teachers who want to use best practices often struggle to implement them without consistent support.

In Kansas City, this landscape grows even more complex. Families must navigate a wide variety of school options, each with its own approach to literacy. This diversity can create opportunities, but it has also led to inconsistent standards and uneven access to evidence-based reading instruction. Parents often lack clear information about what high-quality literacy looks like or how to respond when it is missing.

Decades of research, including 14,000 peer-reviewed articles in the past decade alone, have shown that effective reading instruction can prevent most children, including those with Dyslexia, from experiencing reading failure. Yet systems have adopted these practices slowly, held back by competing philosophies, limited investment in teacher training, and institutional inertia.

The purposes of this guide are to:

- Summarize the available information on best literacy practices in the early grades
- Empower Kansas City parents with the essential components of literacy to look for, and avoid, in their children's classrooms and schools
- Provide parents with appropriate questions to ask in seeking relevant information about their schools' curricula and practices
- Provide parents with resources for further exploration and steps they might take when their schools are not employing best practices in literacy instruction

WHY HIGH-QUALITY LITERACY INSTRUCTION MATTERS

In the 21st century, proficient literacy is not optional. It is a basic survival skill required to read the label on a cleaning product, understand a prescription, or respond to a court summons. Literacy also opens the door to learning from history's greatest thinkers and to becoming an agent of change in today's world.

Yet too many children are left behind. In 2022, one-third of Kansas City third graders were at least one grade level below proficient reading skills. Research shows that children who struggle with reading in third grade are overwhelmingly likely to continue struggling in later grades. According to a 1996 study, the majority of children identified as having a reading disability in Grade 3 still had a reading disability in Grade 9. According to the Department of Justice, "The link between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is welded to reading failure. Over 70% of inmates in America's prisons cannot read above a fourth-grade level." Reading failure not only leads to future reading failure, but also to much harsher outcomes.

The good news is that reading failure is preventable. Decades of research have shown that high-quality, evidence-based instruction delivered early can significantly impact a child's life trajectory. As Sally Shaywitz, renowned literacy and dyslexia researcher, notes, "evidence-based reading intervention at an early age improves reading fluency and facilitates the development of those neural systems that underlie skilled reading. Teaching matters and can change the brain."



"Good instruction can prevent a lifetime of difficulties: A good beginning has no end."

Judith R. Birsh, Educator

LITERACY AS AN EQUITY AND JUSTICE ISSUE



Access to strong literacy instruction is not only an educational concern; it is a matter of equity and justice. Across the country, schools often fail to provide students of color, students from low-income families, multilingual learners, and students with diagnosed or undiagnosed dyslexia with evidence-based instruction. These failures create persistent opportunity gaps that extend beyond school into future employment, health, and civic participation.

For multilingual learners, dyslexia and other reading challenges can be harder to identify. Best practices include:

Affirming and building on home language: Children's first languages are an asset and foundation for learning literacy skills in English.

Early, clear communication with teachers: Families should ask how progress in both English and the home language is being monitored.

Specialized screening: Dyslexia can be screened for in multiple languages. Delays should not automatically be attributed to learning English.

Collaborative support teams: Look for schools where classroom teachers, English language specialists, and reading interventionists coordinate support.

Culturally and linguistically responsive instruction: Instruction should reflect and respect the child's language background.

Schools can break cycles of inequity and expand opportunity when they commit to teaching every child to read using proven methods, tailored to the needs of diverse learners. Parents, educators, and communities can demand that school systems, policymakers, and decision-makers recognize literacy as a fundamental right.

Want to learn more?

- [Black and Dyslexic Podcast](#): Parents, educators, and advocates share powerful stories about navigating dyslexia, race, and the fight for just and equitable literacy practices.
- [English Learners and Dyslexia: Misconceptions, Identification, and Family Engagement](#): In this 34-minute podcast, Dr. Kelli Sandman-Hurley discusses common misconceptions, strategies for identification, and how families can engage when their child is an English learner.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT



Start with the Green and Red flags

These tables help you quickly spot the practices that support strong reading development and those that may hold your child back.

Use the Parent Questions

Bring these questions to teacher meetings, parent–teacher conferences, or school tours, and use them to get clear, evidence-based answers.

Refer to the Big Five

The sections on phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency give you insight into what high-quality literacy instruction looks like in practice.

Act When You See Red Flags

The “What to Do” section guides you through constructive next steps, enabling you to take action.

Explore the Appendix

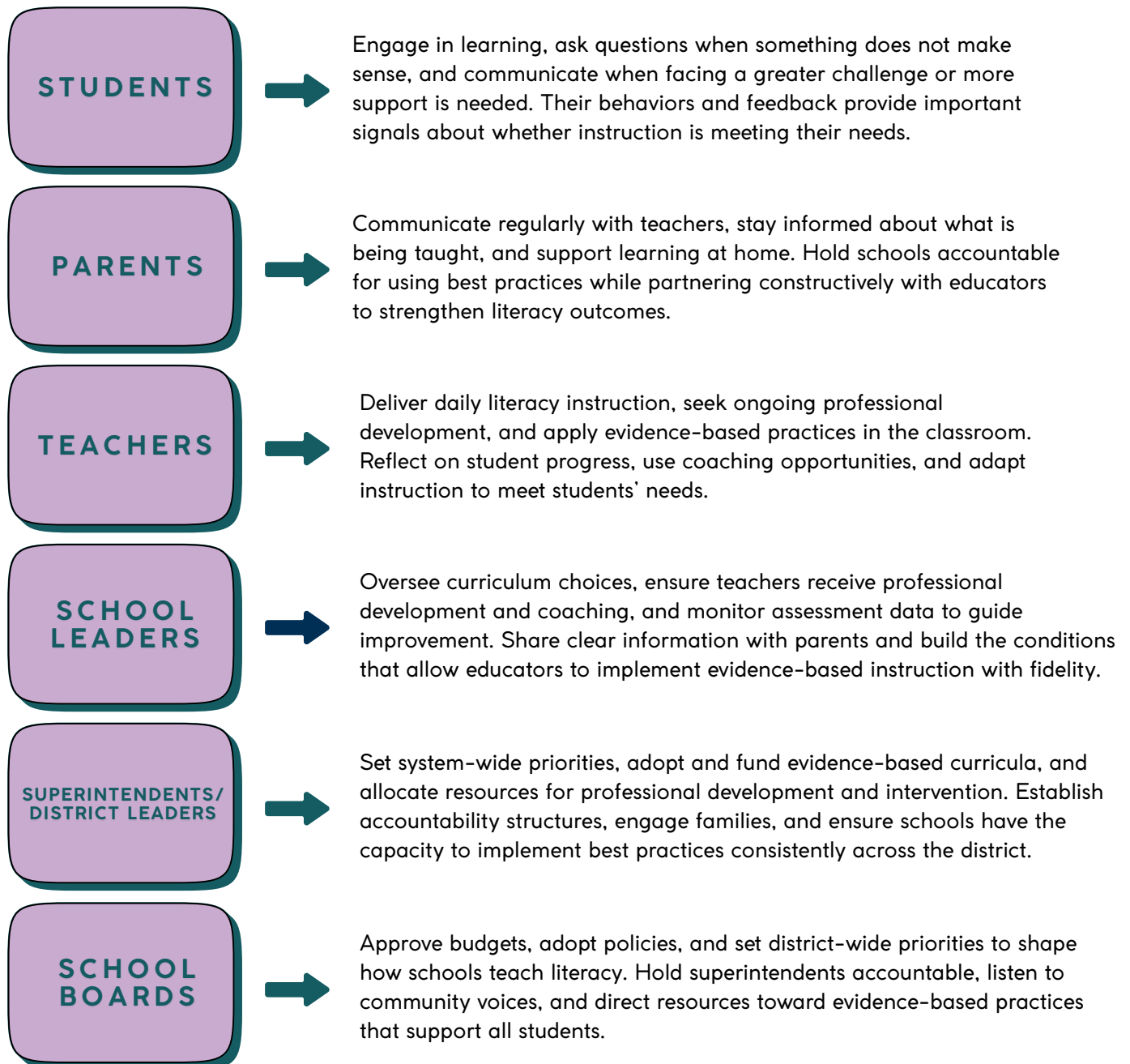
At the end of this toolkit, you will find additional resources, references, and supports to deepen your understanding and guide next steps.

You don't need to read this toolkit cover to cover. Instead, use the sections that match your most pressing questions or concerns, and return to them as your child moves through the school year. Remember, you do not need to be a literacy expert to be a strong advocate for your child. Your questions, persistence, and partnership with educators are powerful tools that can help ensure every child has the chance to become a confident reader.

KEY ROLES IN SUPPORTING LITERACY



High-quality literacy instruction depends on more than any single person. It requires students, parents, teachers, and school leaders each contributing in their own way. When every group understands its role and works in partnership, they create the conditions for children to become confident readers. The callout below highlights the unique responsibilities each of these groups carries in advancing strong literacy practices.



QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS, SCHOOL LEADERS, AND DISTRICT LEADERS



As parents, one of the most powerful tools you have is the ability to ask thoughtful questions. This section offers examples of the kinds of questions that can open up meaningful conversations with teachers, school leaders, and district leaders about how literacy is taught. The questions are not exhaustive, and you may think of others based on your child's needs and what you are observing.

Whether parents are choosing a school for their child to attend or are seeking information from their child's current school, parents may refer to these questions for the classroom teacher or the school leader. Parents do not have to be literacy experts to support their child effectively. The goal is not for parents to be experts in literacy instruction, but to ask good questions and expect clear, confident answers. Parents should listen for confident answers that indicate systematic instruction and measurable outcomes.

These conversations are not about catching schools doing something wrong, but building a partnership between home and school. When parents come with curiosity, clarity, and persistence, they help ensure that schools deliver the evidence-based instruction that every child deserves.

What Parents Should Listen For:

Remember: you don't need to have all the answers — you just need to ask the right questions!

- Teachers and schools should give parents the name of the literacy program or curriculum.
- Schools should be able to give specific information about their approach to literacy instruction, not vague assurances or guarantees.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE TEACHER:

What is your scope and sequence of literacy instruction?

Do you explicitly teach handwriting and letter formations?

How do you teach a child to work through an unknown word when reading?

How do you teach and assess spelling?

How do you approach the instruction of non-phonetic words (words that don't play fair with the rules of English phonics)?

How do you respond to student errors?
How do student errors inform your lesson planning?

(If a child is struggling with reading/literacy): Can you show me the data/assessments you have gathered?

What aspect(s) of literacy is my child struggling with? - *Refer to the Big Five*

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE SCHOOL LEADER OR DISTRICT:

What method does your school/district use to teach reading and spelling?

Is there scientific evidence that the literacy program is effective? May I see an article on the efficacy of the program?

In your approach to literacy instruction, are phonemic awareness and phonics taught explicitly and systematically?

Does the literacy curriculum/approach include many opportunities for repetitive practice?

How does the literacy curriculum/approach incorporate vocabulary, writing, comprehension, and fluency?

Who determines which literacy curriculum is used in the early grades?

What training have the teachers received in using the current literacy curriculum? Is ongoing supervision and support provided to them? At what frequency?

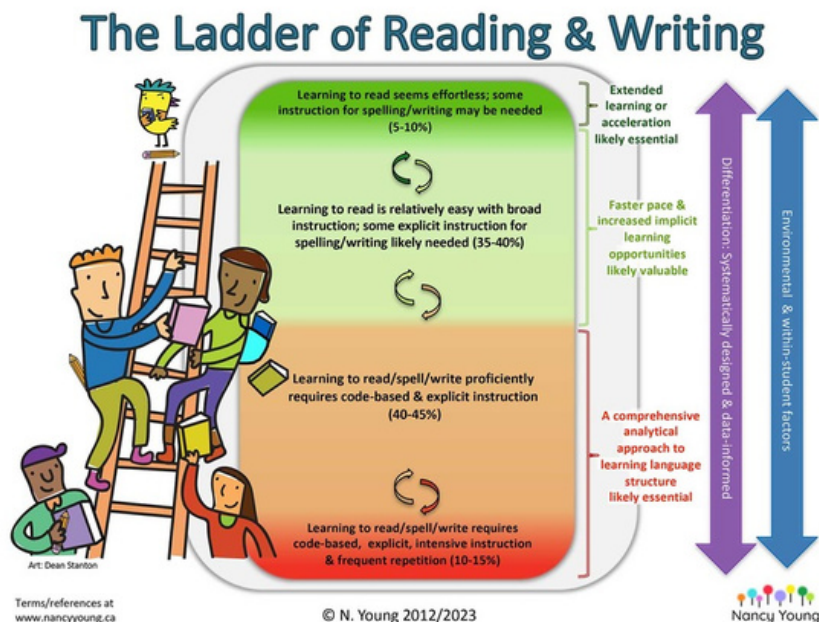
*"Scope and sequence" is a phrase used in education. The "scope" refers to **what** content will be covered and over what estimated period of time. The "sequence" refers to the order of the content that will be taught.*

A good scope and sequence progresses from simple to complex, high-frequency content to low-frequency content, and includes a wealth of opportunities for spiraling review (not just one-and-done exposures to content).

GUIDANCE BY GRADE LEVELS: K-1, 2-3

The following practices and instructional priorities benefit all children. Every child develops at a different rate, and when approaching and mastering new content, some children need more rehearsal than others. If implemented correctly, structured literacy practices can prevent students from falling behind or losing self-esteem, and they can reduce the need for later intervention.

Over 90% of children could be reading at the average range with effective instruction, yet in the United States, only about one-third of fourth graders read proficiently. This gap is not about children's potential but about whether they receive the instruction they need. In 1997, Congress charged a panel of literacy experts and other great minds to delve into the existing research and assess the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read. The panel, which issued its report in 2000, was also tasked with developing recommendations for best literacy practices.



The Ladder of Reading & Writing© is an infographic Nancy Young created in 2012 to visually represent the ease at which children learn to read and write and the instructional implications of that wide range.

This diagram represents the percentages of learners who need some amount of explicit instruction in reading and writing (90%), and breaks them into a few different groups of severity.



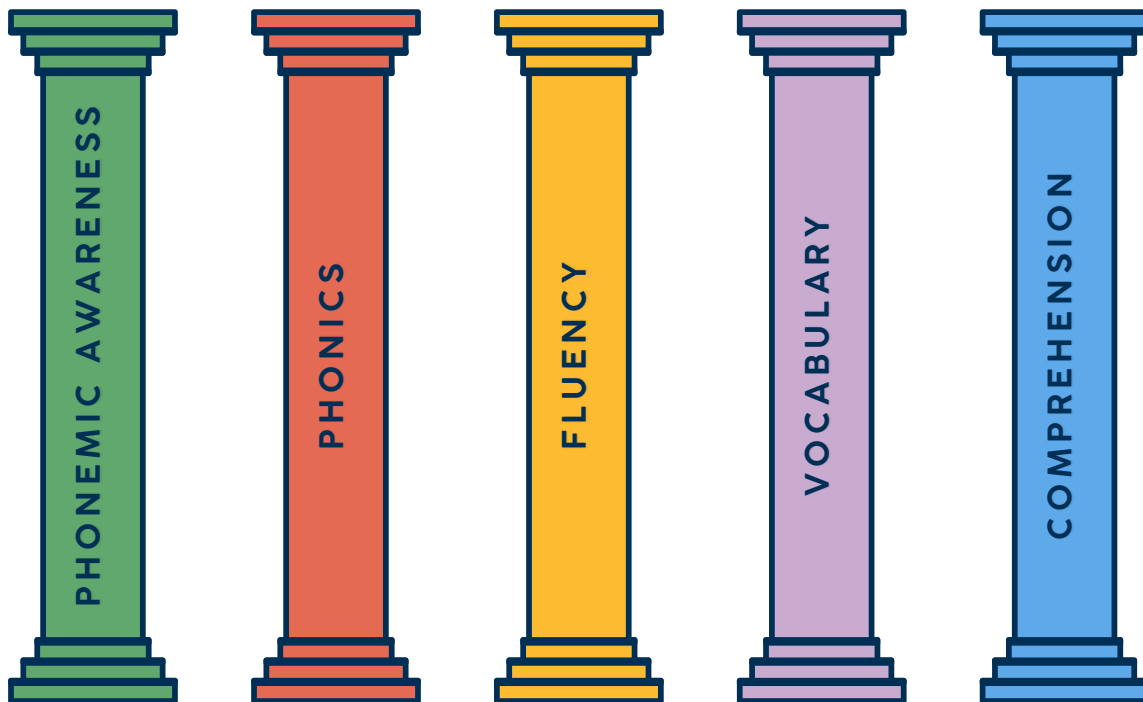
GREEN FLAGS AND RED FLAGS FOR READING AND SPELLING INSTRUCTION

Before diving into the specific literacy categories of the Big Five, this general guidance applies across grade levels and specific components of literacy. In your student’s classroom, reading habits, or homework folder, notice and celebrate these green flags, and question these red flags.

	GREEN FLAGS	RED FLAGS
WORD READING	Students are taught letter-sound relationships and decoding habits. They learn what it means to “sound out” the word and are encouraged to do that when they are unsure what a word says.	Students are taught to guess the word based on the first letter, a picture, or some other context clue. Students are encouraged to memorize whole words or sight words rather than focusing on letter-sound relationships.
TEXT READING	Students bring home passages/books to read out loud based on their learned phonics skills until they demonstrate the ability to read “grade level” text or popular children’s books. Appendix C has a decodable passage.	Students read “leveled readers” or books that are not chosen based on the student’s current word-reading abilities. The rate/speed of reading has greater emphasis than accuracy.
SPELLING	Spelling patterns are taught directly and explicitly alongside reading patterns. If spelling tests occur, they focus on the specific patterns that have been taught. Memorization is discouraged, and tests inform teacher pacing as opposed to a student’s letter grade.	Spelling patterns are not taught; instead, children memorize lists of spelling words and are tested on those memorized words. Words are chosen based on something other than the phonics patterns found within them.
ALL LEARNING	Instruction is direct and explicit and spirals back to review and expand on previously taught content.	Instruction is “one and done” – taught and expected to stick without revisiting or an adequate amount of deliberate practice to achieve mastery.

THE “BIG FIVE”

The information in this toolkit is based on the National Reading Panel’s five essential components of reading: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Comprehension, Vocabulary, and Fluency. We will call these the “Big Five.”



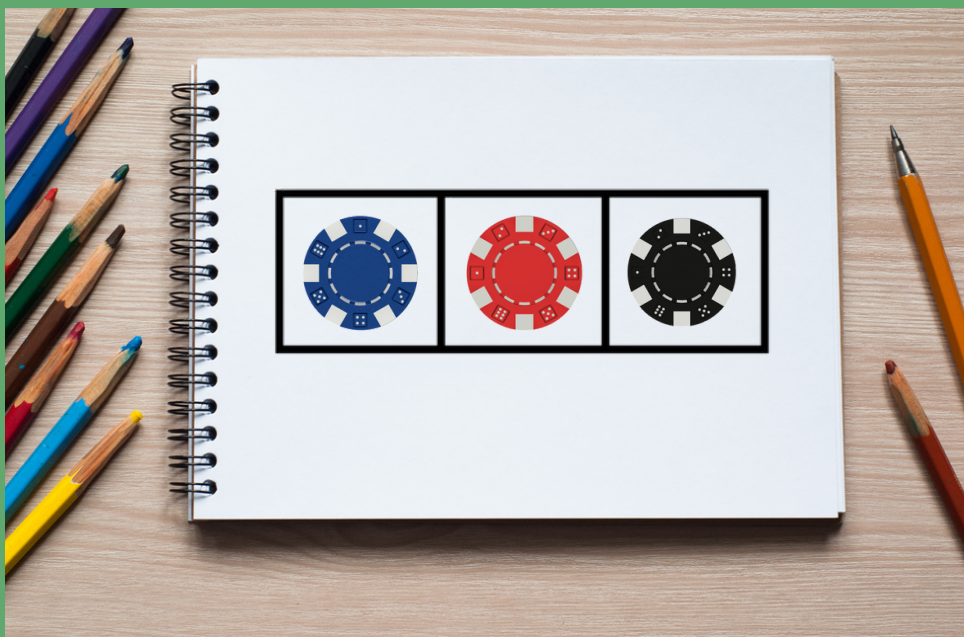
This Toolkit focuses on early grade levels, Kindergarten through third grade, as this is the crucial time when schools build the foundation for excellent literacy skills throughout the rest of the student’s life.

Whether a child is an elementary, middle, or high school student, they need to be met at their current level, then move according to the pace at which they can be successful and master new skills. Skipping steps is not beneficial. For example, we cannot force a student to proficiency with reading 5-sound words (such as "splat") when they are still struggling to read 3-sound words (such as "mat").

PHONEMIC AWARENESS

Phonemic awareness is absolutely essential for becoming a skilled reader. The term Phonemic Awareness refers to the ability to isolate and manipulate individual speech sounds within words. (See some examples in the table on the next page!) Before being taught to read and spell, children must be able to play with, isolate, and manipulate the speech sounds of their language. Pre-K, Kindergarten, and first-grade teachers in particular should include phonemic awareness instruction and practice in their daily literacy lessons.

These activities typically do not involve letters until the child demonstrates automatic skills with letter-sound correspondence (also known as phonics, a distinctly different skill, and the next of the Big Five). Instead, Phonemic Awareness activities focus on sounds with speaking and listening only, sometimes with the addition of small tokens a child can manipulate that represent the sounds before the child knows their letters.



Elkonin Boxes

Elkonin boxes can be used to help children segment the sounds of a word using tokens (not letters). This helps them focus on sounds before looking at letters, which can convolute the process. At later stages, letters may be used to support phonemic awareness activities.

Research underscores the critical importance of this skill: **88 percent of struggling readers exhibit a weakness in the phonological processing system**, as determined by neurological testing. Building strong phonemic awareness early can prevent many children from becoming part of that statistic.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION IN KINDERGARTEN AND 1ST GRADE

Screeners to assess a student's phonemic awareness skills

Rhyming books, chanting, and songs that play with language and encourage play with speech sounds

Activities that involve segmenting and blending the sounds of a word - What sounds do you hear in cat? /k/ /a/ /t/. Touch the picture that has /m/ as the last sound. Blend these sounds and choose the matching picture: /p/ /o/ /t/.

Look for: Images of mouths, real or cartoon, associated with specific letter sounds - children should be taught what parts of their mouths are used to make each letter sound.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION IN 2ND AND 3RD GRADE

Screeners to assess a student's phonemic awareness skills - students who test below expectation should receive direct instruction tailored to their current ability that allows them to develop automaticity and progress through the scope and sequence.

*Increasing complexity of phonemic awareness tasks, such as deletion and substitution of sounds.
Examples:*

*Deletion: Say melt without the /l/
→ met*

Substitution: Say groom, but instead of /r/ say /l/ → gloom

*Say the sounds of mop backwards
→ pom*

PHONICS

Phonics refers to the relationship between a speech sound, like /mmm/, and letter, like m. Phonics is the aspect of reading that is required for a student to “sound out” a word by looking at the letters and blending them from left to right. It can be difficult for children to learn phonics (letters + their sounds) if they struggle with phonemic awareness (just the sounds). Asking a child to read the word “mop” before he knows “m says /mmm/, o says /o/ and p says /p/” is like asking an adult to bake cookies without the ability to identify eggs, flour, and sugar. We need to be confident with each part (a letter and its sound, an ingredient) in order to build the whole (a word, a recipe).

Phonics must be taught systematically and directly, starting with the simplest and most frequent letter-sound relationships and progressing to more complex and less frequent ones. Research has consistently shown for decades that letter-name knowledge is one of the most powerful predictors of learning to read and of later reading achievement.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION IN KINDERGARTEN AND 1ST GRADE

Children practice building and naming the alphabet daily – not just singing the ABCs. Even better: Children learn and practice hand or body movements for each of the letter names/sounds. Example: s says /sss/, move your body like a snake.)

Children learn and practice the sounds of each letter. It is helpful to accompany this learning with systematic handwriting instruction and keywords for each letter sound.

Children learn the basic vowel and consonant sounds and begin blending. a t → at. Blending progresses from 2 to 3 to 4 sounds and beyond.

Children learn other concepts like h-brothers (sh, ch, th, wh), -ng pattern (sing, sang, song, sung), and common vowel teams (ee, ea, oo, ay).

Look for: A large alphabet on display, bonus points for associated keywords, and letter formation (handwriting) cues.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION IN 2ND AND 3RD GRADE

Children learn multiple spellings for a single sound: e, ee, ea, -y, e-e, ie, ei all spell the long e sound (be, eel, sea, baby...).

Children learn spelling rules, such as double the s right after a short vowel sound (dress, mass, boss), or c says /s/ before e, i, and y (cent, racing, Lucy).

Children learn to read and spell common suffixes and prefixes, and they learn the meanings or parts of speech associated with them. (un- unhappy not, re- redo again, -ed jumped past tense verb, -ful helpful full of)

Children learn strategies to read and spell words with an increasing number of sounds and syllables.

Look for: A sound wall posted in the classroom that builds on students' knowledge of multiple spellings

COMPREHENSION

Comprehension refers to understanding what we read. Accurate comprehension is often stressed or even expected before a child has learned the letter/sound correspondences (phonics skills) necessary to read the individual words in a passage. Instead, listening comprehension should be developed in the early grades, progressing to reading comprehension of decodable text, all the way to reading comprehension of authentic or grade-level text.

At every step of the way, teachers should employ language-rich read-alouds that give students the opportunity to build background knowledge and comprehension skills with text they currently cannot decode themselves. If a child cannot read the words accurately and effortlessly, we cannot expect the child to comprehend the passage.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION IN KINDERGARTEN AND 1ST GRADE

A greater emphasis on listening comprehension than reading comprehension using high-quality read-alouds

Open-ended questions that allow students to consider and process the story

Curriculum includes a clear sequence of print, grammar, and syntax concepts.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION IN 2ND AND 3RD GRADE

Increasing emphasis on reading comprehension, with listening comprehension and quality read-alouds still in place

Genre and text types are explicitly taught.

Comprehension strategies are directly taught and modeled, and students demonstrate skills using text they can decode with accuracy.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION ACROSS GRADE LEVELS

Read-alouds feature a variety of diverse, complex texts, including narrative and expository texts above the student's own reading level, to develop background knowledge and vocabulary in various subject areas.

Background knowledge building is emphasized; children struggle to comprehend text for which they have no background knowledge. Successful programs prioritize teaching content rather than over-emphasizing comprehension strategies.

Comprehension monitoring strategies are taught, and children are given opportunities for deliberate practice.

Look for books on a bookshelf organized by theme or decodability rather than an arbitrary "level" system.

VOCABULARY

Vocabulary refers to the meanings of words in a language. It might surprise you to learn that there is really no such thing as “developmentally appropriate” vocabulary instruction. Any child who understands a concept can be taught a word for that concept. Thus, this section does not separate green flags by grade level.

Vocabulary instruction should focus on robust instruction of words that apply across content areas, giving students a big bang for their buck and plenty of opportunities to practice saying these words themselves. Vocabulary instruction, as recommended by Isabel Beck and colleagues in *Bringing Words to Life*, should focus on words such as “consider,” “familiar,” and “increase.” Teaching meaning and expanding students’ awareness of such words should be favored over memorization and prioritizing uncommon, domain-specific words. Science- or math-specific vocabulary should be taught within those content areas.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION ACROSS GRADE LEVELS

Students are exposed to rich vocabulary and complex syntax orally, including within read-alouds – students can develop vocabulary beyond that which their independent reading level would allow.

Vocabulary words are taught in such a way that allows children to understand and use them in multiple contexts and develop a deeper awareness of words.

Vocabulary and phonics are tied together through explicit instruction of homophones (words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings – hair, hare).

FLUENCY

Fluency refers to one's ability to read accurately, quickly, and effortlessly. A fluent reader modulates their voice volume to emphasize certain words, pays attention to punctuation, and creates shifts in tone or pitch rather than reading in a monotone voice. Often, a fluency "score" is calculated using two metrics: speed and accuracy. While both of these are important, they are not the end-all be-all of fluency. Readers can be accurate and speedy without understanding what they have read, so expression and comprehension must also be included when evaluating a reader's fluency. Fluency can be developed at every level, starting with blending a few sounds, progressing to blending words in a phrase or sentence, and ultimately reading various text genres.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION IN KINDERGARTEN AND 1ST GRADE

Practice towards automaticity happens at the letter level (say the sound when you see the letter), to the word level (say the word without having to blend the sounds aloud, to the phrase and sentence level (put the words together using expression).

Visual drills where students say the sound(s) of the given letter to increase automaticity.

Auditory drills where the students write the ways they know how to spell a sound given by the teacher.

Blending drills where students blend real and nonsense words that feature the patterns they have been taught.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION IN 2ND AND 3RD GRADE

Practice towards automaticity happens at the letter and word level and progresses to the phrase, sentence, and passage level.

Fluency practice teaches and encourages prosody with tools and practices, including decodable texts, poetry, readers' theater, and paired reading.

Handwriting instruction, maintenance, and periodic tune-ups allow the student to become a fluent speller and writer, freeing up their thinking for more complex writing tasks.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION ACROSS GRADE LEVELS

Instruction focuses on accuracy and automaticity in reading, rather than speed.

Decodable texts, which feature concepts that a student has been taught explicitly, are used for reading practice.

Oral reading is emphasized (children can demonstrate skill this way) as opposed to silent reading - A teacher cannot monitor fluency progress if a child is not reading aloud.

Look for careful attention to accuracy, prioritizing accuracy over speed.

Look for your child being asked to read aloud to the teacher.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU NOTICE STRENGTHS: GREEN FLAGS

Seeing green flags and effective instructional practices is a sign that your child's school is on the right track. This doesn't mean parents can step back entirely, but it does mean you can feel reassured and continue building a partnership with your child's teacher. Here are some ways to respond to green flags and effective instruction:



CELEBRATE AND AFFIRM GOOD PRACTICE

Let teachers and school leaders know when you notice strong instruction. A quick thank you note or conversation reinforces what's working and helps sustain best practices.



STAY ENGAGED

Keep asking questions, attending school events, and supporting learning at home. Even in strong schools, parent involvement remains one of the biggest predictors of positive outcomes.



SHARE WITH OTHER PARENTS

If you see effective instruction, talk about it in your community. Sharing positive examples builds momentum for best practices across classrooms and schools.



ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD

Notice and name their progress. Celebrate their efforts and encourage best practices in literacy. "I love how you sounded that word out," or "You read all the way through to the end of the word, even though it was hard!" "Wow! How did you know to make the O sound in that word?" "I heard you use a question voice when you saw a question mark!" This builds confidence and helps connect positive feelings to reading.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU NOTICE CONCERNS: RED FLAGS

Seeing red flags or not observing effective instructional practices does not mean it is time to panic or immediately switch schools. Instead, it is a signal to ask more questions and explore additional steps to support your child's growth. Here are some ways to respond to red flags:



START WITH A CONVERSATION

Schedule a meeting with your child's teacher. Ask for specific examples of how reading is being taught and how your child is responding.



USE THE QUESTIONS IN THIS TOOLKIT

The lists of questions for teachers and leaders are designed to help you get clear, concrete information rather than vague assurances.



DOCUMENT WHAT YOU SEE

Keep notes on your child's reading struggles, what teachers say, and what you observe. Written records can be helpful if you need to seek additional support. Follow up teacher conversations with a brief email to summarize your understanding. This helps create a clear record and ensures mutual understanding.



ASK ABOUT INTERVENTIONS

If your child is struggling, ask whether the school offers targeted, evidence-based reading interventions. Early, structured support is far more effective than waiting.

DON'T WAIT TO ASK FOR HELP



Sometimes the absence of proper instruction is the cause of poor literacy skills, and sometimes the issue is a learning disability. If a child is struggling to make appropriate progress in reading or spelling despite adequate instruction (or intervention), parents should seek an evaluation for dyslexia or other underlying learning issues. Up to 20% of the population has dyslexia, making it the most common learning disability. At any time, a parent/caregiver has the right to ask for a special education evaluation, and the school must respond.* Ask in writing and expect responses in writing to ensure adequate documentation.

One obstacle parents of young struggling readers face is that they notice their child's difficulty, yet the child's teacher or school recommends that the family "give it some more time." Additionally, when seeking a dyslexia evaluation, some local evaluators will not assess a child for dyslexia until the child has completed first grade. Parents should not be dissuaded by these obstacles from seeking intervention and answers; the best time to intervene is always now.

For additional support, refer to Appendix G for a literacy timeline in a typical school year and tools to help identify special education needs, including learning disabilities such as dyslexia.

**Public schools are legally bound to Child Find, a part of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act. Child Find mandates that schools have policies in place regarding the identification of students with disabilities.*

CONCLUSION

Supporting your child's reading journey can feel overwhelming, especially when you are faced with new terms, assessments, and instructional approaches. You may wonder if you are asking the right questions or if you know enough to make a difference.

Remember, you do not need to be an expert in literacy to be a strong advocate for your child. What matters most is your willingness to stay curious, to ask questions, and to partner with teachers and schools. Advocacy alone does not always bring immediate change, which is why it is important to lean on the support around you. Other parents, community organizations, and networks like the Parent Leadership Training Institute can stand with you.

This toolkit is a first step. It offers guidance, language, and reassurance so you can begin or continue literacy conversations with confidence. You are not alone in this work. Parents across Kansas City are walking the same path, asking the same questions, and building momentum together.

The responsibility for literacy belongs to schools, systems, and communities, and these institutions are obligated to listen to and respond to parent concerns. Parents bring essential insight into their children's needs and experiences, and that knowledge must be taken seriously.

Trust your gut. Trust what you know about your child. Speak up when something feels off, and keep asking questions until you get answers. Your voice can spark the changes needed to ensure every child receives the instruction they deserve. Parents play a powerful role in shaping what comes next.



APPENDIX

A. WHY STRUCTURED LITERACY MATTERS: COMPARING INSTRUCTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

If a named framework guides a given school or classroom's literacy instruction, it is likely either Structured Literacy or Balanced Literacy (sometimes also called Whole Language). While "structure" and "balance" both sound like positive and thoughtful approaches, decades of research in the Science of Reading show that the practices and priorities of Structured Literacy are far more effective at helping children learn to read.

This comparison is not meant to judge individual teachers or schools that have used Balanced Literacy approaches. Many educators were trained in these methods and are working hard with the tools they were given. The purpose of this chart is to give parents background knowledge to understand what they may see or hear in their child's school and why certain approaches are more likely to produce strong reading outcomes.

STRUCTURED LITERACY

BALANCED LITERACY/ WHOLE LANGUAGE

SUMMARY

The Structured Literacy approach recognizes that children will not be able to perform higher-level tasks (comprehending what they read, reading with fluency) if they are not directly taught to decode the sounds of the language explicitly and systematically.

The Balanced Literacy approach assumes students will be able to read and comprehend if reading is modeled by teachers and students are taught several guessing strategies to figure out unknown words.

COMPONENTS

Direct teaching of and practice of patterns found in English words for reading and spelling

Emphasizes reading and writing for pleasure

Emphasis on sound-symbol relationship (phonics) for reading and spelling

Reading is modeled by teachers through read-alouds

Emphasis on phonemic awareness (the ability to isolate and manipulate the individual speech sounds of language)

To read a text, children are encouraged to use strategies such as context clues, pictures, and guessing a word based on the first letter.

Direct instruction in syllable types and dividing longer words into manageable chunks (syllables)

Students read "leveled" text or are part of a group of a certain "level" - levels are not based on the decodability of text.

Direct instruction in morphology, the word parts with meaning in a language (un- means not; unhappy means not happy)

Students self-select books to read independently.

Emphasis on listening comprehension (as opposed to reading comprehension) before children are able to read.

Comprehension strategies are emphasized.

Reading comprehension is only measured using decodable text (text that a student is able to decode, aka, use phonics skills to attack each word).

Direct instruction in phonics is minimal and thought of as one of many approaches to reading a word, rather than the most accurate and consistent way to approach single-word reading.

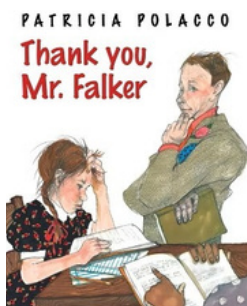
B. RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

TO READ:

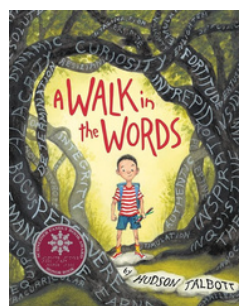
When we say “read,” we also mean “listen”! Reading with your ears is still reading, especially for people who can comprehend better when the text is auditory.

- [Overcoming Dyslexia](#) by Sally Shaywitz — A parent-friendly, research-based guide to understanding, identifying, and supporting children with dyslexia. Some of the ‘Questions to Ask the Teacher and School Leader’ on Page 11 of this toolkit have been adapted from Sally Shaywitz’s influential work.
- [Proust and the Squid](#) by Maryanne Wolf — A fascinating look at how the human brain learns to read and why some children struggle.
- [Reading and the Brain](#) by Stanislas Dehaene — A neuroscience-based explanation of how the brain processes written language.
- [The Knowledge Gap](#) by Natalie Wexler — An exploration of how the lack of content knowledge contributes to inequities in reading achievement.
- [Equipped for Reading Success](#) by David Kilpatrick — A practical resource on building phonemic awareness and word recognition skills.
- [Dyslexia Advocate!](#) by Kelli Sandman-Hurley — A guide to navigating the public school system and advocating for a child with dyslexia.
- [Sold a Story](#) — An investigative podcast about how flawed reading methods became widespread in schools.
- [Science of Reading: The Podcast](#) — Interviews with literacy experts, researchers, and educators about evidence-based reading practices.
- [Black and Dyslexic](#) — Personal stories and advocacy focused on the intersection of race and dyslexia.

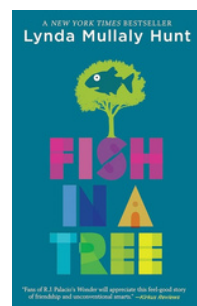
NOTABLE BOOKS FEATURING CHILDREN WITH DYSLEXIA:



[Thank You, Mr. Falker](#)
by Patricia Polacco



[A Walk in the Words](#)
by Hudson Talbott



[Fish in a Tree](#)
by Lynda Mullaly Hunt



[Percy Jackson & the Olympians series](#)
by Rick Riordan

[Florida Center for Reading Research](#) — Games and activities for building phonics and phonological awareness at each grade level.

[Reading Rockets](#) — A comprehensive site with articles, videos, and strategies for parents and teachers.

[Understood.org](#) — Clear, supportive information about learning disabilities and how to get help at school.

[International Dyslexia Association](#) — Research, guidance, and parent resources, including an overview of *Structured Literacy*.

[The Reading League's Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines](#) — A tool to help schools evaluate if a curriculum aligns with the science of reading. The Red Flags and Green Flags portion of this Toolkit, as well as guidance on the Big Five, has been adapted from The Reading League's Guidelines. Revisions are made periodically, and the organization sends updated information to those who sign up when downloading the Guidelines.

[Wrightslaw](#) — A website that provides accurate and updated information about special education law and advocacy.

[Kansas Dyslexia Handbook](#) — Provides dyslexia guidance for Kansas educators and stakeholders.

[Kansas Literacy Blueprint](#) — Literacy legislation that requires evidence-based literacy instruction used in Kansas schools.

[Missouri Senate Bill 68](#) — Legislation that bans the three-cueing instructional model described in this toolkit under Balanced Literacy and the instructional strategies to avoid.

What is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?

This federal law guarantees special education services, including rights such as:

- **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):** *Students should learn with their peers to the greatest extent possible.*
- **Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE):** *Every child has the right to an education tailored to their needs, at no cost to families.*

[Learn more here](#)

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Comprehension

The ability to understand and make meaning from what is read. Comprehension depends on accurate word reading, vocabulary knowledge, and background knowledge.

Decodable Text

Books or passages made up mostly of words that follow letter-sound patterns a child has already been taught. Decodable text helps children practice applying learned phonics skills.

Decoding

"Decoding" means using our knowledge of letter-sound relationships and patterns to "sound out" a word from left to right

Dyslexia

A specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition, poor spelling, and challenges with decoding. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language. For a more in-depth definition and its context, visit the International Dyslexia Association website here: <https://dyslexiaida.org/2025-dyslexia-definition-project/>

Evidence-Based Instruction

Teaching methods or programs that are supported by high-quality research showing they improve student outcomes when implemented correctly.

Fluency

The ability to read with accuracy, appropriate speed, and expression. Fluent readers can focus on understanding what they read because they do not have to stop and decode most words.

Phonemic Awareness

The ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. It is an essential early reading skill and does not involve printed letters.

Phonics

The understanding of how letters and groups of letters connect to sounds in spoken language. Phonics instruction teaches children to use and rely upon these letter–sound relationships to read and spell words as opposed to guessing or using other picture or context clues.

Phonological Awareness

A set of skills that includes identifying and manipulating parts of words, rhyming, counting the number of syllables, and isolating and manipulating individual speech sounds. *Phonemic awareness* is a sub-skill of phonological awareness. See the definition of Phonemic Awareness on page 28.

Specific Learning Disability (SLD)

A category of disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that includes reading disorders such as dyslexia. Students with SLDs are eligible for special education services if their disability impacts learning. In a public school setting, a child will likely not be identified as having “dyslexia.” The field of psychology may also refer to a student as having a Specific Learning Disorder, as that is the language used in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5). These terms (Dyslexia, Specific Learning Disability, Specific Learning Disorder) are used somewhat interchangeably and refer to the same set of challenges.

Structured Literacy

An approach to reading instruction that is explicit, systematic, cumulative, and diagnostic. It teaches all key components of reading (phonology, sound–symbol relationships, syllable types, morphology, syntax, and semantics) and is especially effective for students with dyslexia.

Vocabulary

The words a person knows and understands. A strong vocabulary helps students comprehend what they read and express themselves clearly.

D. WHAT IS A DECODABLE PASSAGE?

This text is decodable (possible to be read independently) for a child who has learned how to read the phonogram -ang (bang, sang). The child who is reading this must also know how to read the other words in this passage.

Bang the Drum

Do you like to bang a drum?

Does she like to clang the pans?

Does he like to chat in slang?

Do I want to hang the hats?

She sang this tune with a twang,

With her band, a singing gang!

E. LITERACY TIMELINE: WHAT TO EXPECT AND HOW TO ENGAGE

August – School Begins

- Students adjust to new routines, meet their classmates, and build relationships with their teachers.
- Schools often conduct initial literacy screeners or benchmark tests (such as NWEA).
- Teachers observe students to understand strengths, challenges, and learning styles.

Parent Tip: *Share what you know about your child's learning. Ask when initial assessments will happen and how results will be shared with families.*

September – Early Instruction and Goal Setting

- Teachers begin structured literacy instruction (letters, sounds, early blending).
- Classroom routines around reading groups and centers are introduced.
- Schools may set goals for reading growth at the beginning of the year.

Parent Tip: *Ask your child's teacher what reading skills they are focusing on and how you can reinforce practice at home. If the teacher creates small instructional groups, ask how those groups are determined.*

October – November Conferences and Early Progress

- Parent/Teacher Conferences are typically scheduled this month.
- By now, teachers have sufficient information to describe your child's progress and early strengths, as well as areas of concern.
- Children who require extra support may be grouped together in small settings through Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).
- Teachers refine instruction based on assessment data and classroom performance.

Parent Tip: *Come to conferences with questions (see toolkit list). Ask specifically about phonemic awareness, phonics, and how your child is being supported if they are struggling.*

Parent Tip: *If your child is placed in an intervention group, ask about the program being used, how the students are grouped (By shared challenge? By learning pace? Something else?) how progress is tracked, and how you will be updated.*

January – March – Midyear Progress

- Schools often administer a midyear benchmark test to measure growth.
- Teachers adjust reading groups according to student progress.
- Teachers expect more automatic recognition of letter-sound relationships.
- Some schools hold spring conferences.

Parent Tip: Review the data you receive. Ask: Is my child on track? If you hear that your child is not on track but will catch up, inquire about additional support and intervention.

April – May – Preparing for the next grade

- End-of-year assessments are given, and teachers share growth.
- Schools begin discussing readiness for the next grade.

Parent Tip: Ask for a summary of your child's reading progress. If gaps remain, request a plan for continued support over the summer and into the next grade.

**Created by parents and educators to help
families grow strong readers.**

