

OVERVIEW

The North Dakota Legislative Assembly House Bill [1231](#) required the State Superintendent of Public Instruction Kirsten Baesler to appoint a task force to review all sections of the North Dakota Century Code related to literacy, dyslexia, and teacher professional development. In March 2024, a Task Force comprised of key stakeholders related to literacy in North Dakota was appointed to review existing literacy legislation and make recommendations for possible changes to the Century Code that might result in improved literacy outcomes for all students. From March through July 2024, one in-person meeting, three virtual sessions, and two virtual listening sessions were held with a focus on the science of reading, dyslexia, and teacher training and professional development. Through the four convenings, the Committee met its objective to develop a comprehensive set of recommendations incorporating feedback and perspectives from diverse literacy stakeholders across North Dakota.

The North Dakota Literacy Task Force members can be found in **Appendix A**.

During this phase of the work, Committee members heard directly from North Dakota stakeholders and national experts who shared:

- [Nationwide](#), 34 percent of fourth graders read at or above proficiency levels, leaving 65 percent below proficiency.
- National scores have [stagnated](#), with only a 5 percent increase in proficiency over the last eight years.
- The US is facing a [literacy crisis](#), with over 43 million adults being functionally illiterate.
- Teachers must have a strong foundation in the science of reading to effectively teach all students.
- Being a skilled reader does not equate to being an effective reading teacher. Teachers need explicit training in evidence-based reading practices.
- Foundational theories in the Science of Reading are based on five decades of research grounded in the neuroscience of how the human brain learns to read.
- [Simple View of Reading](#): Reading comprehension is a product of decoding and language comprehension.
- [Scarborough's Reading Rope](#): A visual metaphor showing how various components of word recognition and language comprehension intertwine to produce skilled reading.
- The [five pillars of literacy](#), including [phonemic awareness](#), [phonics](#), [fluency](#), [vocabulary](#), and [comprehension](#), form the foundation of [structured literacy](#), which is essential for preventing and addressing reading difficulties.
- Key components of structured literacy include [phonology](#), [morphology](#) and [syntax, and semantics](#).
- Structured literacy instructional strategies include:
 - [Explicit Instruction](#): Clear, direct teaching of concepts, skills, and strategies.
 - [Scaffolded Instruction](#): Providing supports to help students master reading skills, such as using Elkonin boxes, hand gestures, and oral cues.
 - [Decodable Texts](#): Using texts that allow students to practice specific phonics skills in context.
- Without appropriate reading instruction, 70% of children at risk for reading failure in first grade will continue to struggle with reading into adulthood.
- [Dyslexia](#) is a neurobiological learning disability characterized by difficulties with word recognition, spelling, and decoding.
- A typical reading brain experiences efficient interaction between visual processing and language pathways, while a dyslexic brain experiences disruption in the posterior reading system, leading to difficulties in letter-sound connection and word analysis.
- High-quality instructional materials (HQIM) aligned to state and national standards, provide rigorous, explicit instruction with guidance, reflect diversity and inclusiveness, and include professional development for effective implementation.
- [Washington, DC](#), developed sequential, comprehensive evidence-aligned literacy instructional materials, including steps for implementation.

- The [Mississippi Department of Education](#) provides HQIM [tools and supports](#), guidance on [selecting](#) materials, and links to [resources](#).
- North Dakota's literacy policy development began in 2015, with legislative collaboration beginning in 2019 with the introduction of [dyslexia legislation](#). There is recognition that creating policy is not enough; effective implementation is crucial.
- North Dakota's [PK-12 Education Strategic Vision](#), developed in 2016, remains the guiding document for literacy policy. The focus is on early childhood experiences, quality education personnel, and the implementation of evidence-based practices.
- North Dakota Stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, and other state entities, are critical in informing and implementing literacy policies. There is an emphasis on using data to drive decisions and sharing successful practices across districts.
- Inconsistent implementation across North Dakota is noted, with some educators continuing to use outdated practices. Changing adult behaviors to ensure consistent, effective teaching methods is a key challenge.
- In North Dakota, there has been significant support for K-3 students. However, older students in grades 4-12 have not benefited as much from recent educational reforms. Addressing the needs of all PK-12 students is critical.
- Relearning and adapting new teaching best practices is difficult for educators. Continuous, focused professional development is needed to support effective teaching practices.
- North Dakota's local control of education complicates ensuring that schools use high-quality instructional materials consistently across the state.
- Barriers such as academic freedom in higher education make it difficult to standardize teacher preparation. However, there has been progress in aligning teacher education with the science of reading.
- Teachers may view training as a one-time task rather than an ongoing process. Ensuring continuous professional development and access to high-quality resources is essential.
- The 2024 North Dakota Literacy Summit highlighted the commitment of educators to improve literacy instruction, with many attending on their own time and expense.
- [Research](#) supports the importance of coaching and feedback in translating training into classroom practice, with significant improvements seen in schools implementing literacy coaching.
- Educators need a better understanding of dyslexia and the importance of screening and appropriate interventions. Dyslexia screening laws exist, but implementation support is needed for deeper understanding.
- Engaging families, particularly in early childhood, is crucial for building foundational literacy skills. There is also a recognition of the challenges children of adults with low literacy levels face.

In considering the experience of North Dakota's students, educators, stakeholders, and evidence-aligned best practices, the Committee put forward the following recommendations to strengthen the state's literacy landscape in science of reading aligned literacy instruction, dyslexia screening and intervention, and teacher training and professional development. The Committee believes that, while not exhaustive, enacting these recommendations would serve to meet the needs and work towards literacy instruction and outcomes in North Dakota.

IMPROVING LITERACY OUTCOMES THROUGH THE SCIENCE OF READING

Early literacy proficiency is critical to achievement and success in both school and life. Students who lack reading proficiency entering fourth grade are [four times](#) more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers – and the number is even higher for students living in poverty. Low literacy skills can also have a lasting impact into adulthood - [43 percent](#) of adults with low literacy skills live in poverty. Despite robust research detailing the importance of reading proficiency and decades of efforts to improve early literacy instruction, the United States broadly struggles to effectively teach children to read.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted reading progress nationally. According to data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), between 2019 and 2022, average reading scores for both fourth- and eighth-grade students decreased by three points. In 2022, fourth-grade students experienced a five-point decline, the largest since 1984. In 2022, 21 percent of New Mexico's fourth-grade students scored at or above proficiency on the NAEP, yet New Mexico's fourth-grade reading proficiency was below the 2022 national average of 33 percent. Fourth-grade reading proficiency is essential as it is a predictor of later academic outcomes including high school graduation and college application rates, as well as lifetime earning potential.

To increase students' reading proficiency, students must be properly taught how to read using evidence-aligned strategies and methods grounded in the neuroscience of how the human brain learns to read. The body of research related to evidence-aligned reading instruction is referred to as the science of reading. It represents the collection of practices gathered from five decades of multi-disciplinary research in education, psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience. Coupled with explicit instruction, the identified five pillars of instruction that contribute to reading development:

- **Phonemic Awareness:** The ability to hear and manipulate the smallest unit of sound in spoken words.
- **Phonics:** Letter-sound relationships.
- **Oral Reading Fluency:** Reading with appropriate accuracy, speed, and expression.
- **Vocabulary:** Understanding the meaning of words and phrases in print.
- **Comprehension:** The process of making meaning of text.

Recommendations to Strengthen Science of Reading Aligned Literacy Instruction

Expand North Dakota Century Code Section 15.1-13-35.1

The Task Force recommends:

- Expanding North Dakota Century Code Section 15.1-13-35.1 to include reading instruction competency requirements for all licensure candidates instead of limiting requirements to only pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, elementary, and special education licensure candidates.

Ensure practitioners have access to high-quality, evidence-aligned literacy resources and materials

The Task Force recommends:

- Developing a recommended list of teacher-approved, high-quality, evidence-aligned instructional materials and incentivize adoption through funding.

Develop an Accountability System

The Task Force recommends:

- Developing an accountability system to monitor the implementation and alignment of evidence-aligned literacy instruction that embeds the five pillars of literacy.

Ensure all students in North Dakota enter the kindergarten – twelfth-grade public school system prepared to learn

The Task Force recommends:

- Funding pre-kindergarten for all students state-wide.

Highlight positive aspects of North Dakota's Public School System

The Task Force recommends:

- To consider marketing strategies to elevate work happening in public schools.

PRE-SERVICE AND IN-SERVICE SCIENCE OF READING INSTRUCTION TRAINING

While it is difficult to determine exactly how many teachers use the science of reading in their classrooms, the probability is higher if teachers are provided instruction on evidence-based practices in their educator preparation programs. As of 2020, 32 states required Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) to address the science of reading for at least some teacher candidates.

A national review of [syllabi](#) also found that coverage of the science of reading within university coursework is increasing. While surveys and syllabi reviews alone are not sufficient to truly measure how effectively the science of reading is embedded in teacher preparation programs, it provides some insight into the growing awareness of the science at the EPP level.

Across the country, policymakers have taken steps to encourage or mandate instructional practices aligned with the science of reading. These efforts generally focus on teacher preparation and licensure, early instruction, and professional development.

Teachers are more likely to use the science of reading in classroom instruction if they have learned evidence-aligned instructional practices in their education preparation programs. However, many in-service teachers and pre-service faculty did not learn about the science of reading during their time in EPPs, including advanced degree programs. To combat this, [some states](#) require educators to participate in ongoing professional development rooted in the science of reading.

North Dakota enacted legislation in 2021 requiring statewide professional development in science-aligned reading instructional practices. The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction has also incorporated the [Foundations of Reading and Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling \(LETRS\)](#), evidence-based professional learning designed to equally support beginning and veteran in-service educators for explicit reading instruction. There is also a growing interest in ensuring that pre-service faculty in EPPs receive professional development in the science of reading. The [Mississippi Momentum Partnership](#) is an example of support provided to pre-service faculty. Through this initiative, faculty that taught reading at 15 public and private EPPs in Mississippi were provided [training](#), mentoring, texts, and seminars around the science of reading.

Recommendations to Strengthen Literacy Professional Development and Training

Broaden the scope of evidence-aligned literacy instruction training

The Task Force recommends:

- Broadening the scope of evidence-aligned literacy instruction training to include specialists, fourth through eighth-grade teachers, and paraprofessionals.
- Considering funding scholarships for paraprofessionals to engage in training modules.
- Incorporating Science of Reading Teacher Mentorship Strand.
- Restructuring training to include components of explicit, structured literacy, pedagogy, depth of knowledge, and tools to teach language and literacy skills to all students.

Expand site-level Science of Reading-aligned instructional practices supports

The Task Force recommends:

- Funding building level literacy coaches and developing clear objectives supported by a community of practice.

Expand North Dakota Century Code Section 15.1-13-35.1

The Task Force recommends:

- Expanding North Dakota Century Code Section 15.1-13-35.1 to require a transcript review to verify that pre-service teachers have completed coursework prior to licensure.
- Requiring minimum cut score for licensure exam to test for mastery.

Require University Faculty to be trained in the Science of Reading

The Task Force recommends:

- Requiring Education Preparation Programs to have at least one person trained in Science of Reading aligned instructional strategies and methods.

DYSLEXIA

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that affects the ability to process written language. It often results in reading, spelling, writing, and sometimes speech difficulties. Dyslexia stems from differences in brain processing, particularly

in how the brain decodes phonemes—the smallest units of sound that make up words. Although it can affect individuals in various ways, it typically manifests in struggles with reading fluency and word recognition. It is important to note that dyslexia does not reflect a person's intelligence or effort but rather a neurological variation in learning and language processing.

Dyslexia screeners are tools used to identify early signs of dyslexia in students, often as early as kindergarten or first grade. These assessments evaluate key literacy skills such as phonological awareness, letter-sound knowledge, and rapid naming abilities, which are crucial in identifying potential reading difficulties. Early identification through these screeners allows educators to provide targeted interventions before the gap between dyslexic students and their peers widens. Dyslexia screeners are essential for guiding early and effective instruction and ensuring students receive the support they need to succeed.

Evidence-aligned literacy instruction, such as structured literacy approaches, is critical in helping students with dyslexia learn to read. These explicit, systematic, and sequential methods focus on phonics, phonemic awareness, decoding, and comprehension. Structured literacy breaks down reading into its foundational components and provides frequent, cumulative practice. Programs like Orton-Gillingham and Wilson Reading System are examples of evidence-based instruction that use multi-sensory techniques to engage visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning pathways. With this tailored, research-backed approach, students with dyslexia can develop the skills they need to become confident, proficient readers.

Recommendations to Strengthen Dyslexia Screening and Instructional Practices for Students with Learning Differences

Multi-Tiered System of Support:

The Task Force recommends:

- Expanding the North Dakota Century Code Section 15.1-21-12.1 to include language around Multi-Tiered Systems of Support.

Amend North Dakota Century Code Section 15.1-32-36(3)

The Task Force recommends:

- Moving the dyslexia statute from the North Dakota Century Code Section 15.1-32-36(3) from the special education section to the North Dakota Century Code Section 15.1-21-12.1 or the North Dakota Century Code Section 15.1-21-08.
- Updating screening age requirement in North Dakota Century Code section 15.1-32-36(3) from seven years old to eight years old to better align with the third-grade age group.

Reframe Dyslexia Nomenclature

The Task Force recommends:

- Changing phrasing for dyslexia from “diagnosis” test language to “screen” and “identify” language.
- Articulating process to communicate on-grade level and at-risk results of screening assessment to parents/guardians.

Support out-of-school time programs to support students' needs

The Task Force recommends:

- Providing special services for needs beyond school doors, such as therapy and tutoring, at no cost for all students.

Appendix A

North Dakota Literacy Task Force Members

Task Force Members:

- Kirsten Baseler | North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, State Superintendent
- Angie Waletzko | Parent and Family Engagement
- Dr. Pam Krueger | Dickinson State University
- Janet Bassingthwaite | Mandan Public Schools, Early Learning Coordinator
- Tina Pletan | Bismarck Public Schools, K-5 Literacy Specialist
- Jerlyn Gabrielson | Flasher Public Schools, Elementary Teacher
- Nicole Manson | Fargo Public Schools, Interventionist
- Nicole Polum | Grand Forks Public Schools, Middle School Teacher
- Ben Scallon | Lakota Public Schools, High School Teacher
- Dr. Nicole Reybok | Griggs-Steele-Traill Special Education Unit, Director of Special Education
- Cheryl Hagar | Minot Public Schools, Title I and Family Engagement Coordinator
- Kerri Whipple | Southeast Education Cooperative, Director of Literacy
- Beth Slette | West Fargo Public Schools, Superintendent
- Dr. Sherry Tandeski | St. John School District, Elementary Principal
- Dr. Noelle Green | McKenzie County Public Schools, Middle School Principal
- Representative Cindy Schreiber-Beck | North Dakota State House
- Senator Donald Schaible | North Dakota State Senate
- Kari Bucholz | Haley's Hope Dyslexia Learning Center
- Dr. Cory Steiner | North Dakota Education Standards and Practices Board, Chair

Ex-Officio Members:

- Dr. Becky Pitkin | North Dakota Education Standards and Practices Board, Executive Director
- Brenda Ehrmantraut | North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, Assistant Director of Academic Support
- Lea Kugel | North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, Assistant Director of Specially Designed Services
- Ann Ellefson | North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, Director of Academic Support
- Jessica Thomasson | North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services, Executive Policy Director