



NYC Reads Together

A Citywide Movement to Ensure Every Child Reads and Writes by 2035

Focus across the U.S. on one of the most fundamental aims of schooling—literacy—is generating unparalleled alignment across constituencies and a once in a generation opportunity for impact. This alignment has already catalyzed key steps to improve schooling. First, the Science of Reading confirmed how kids learn to read. Next, the “Mississippi Miracle” applied the science of reading to elevate a state long at the bottom in student reading proficiency into mid-range performance.¹ From there, widespread criticism of the unproven premises and proven foibles of the prior approach and concerted advocacy on behalf of students with disabilities and all students for whom that approach especially failed to gain steam.² Now, systems are reorienting to base literacy instruction on the science of reading. Literacy has our collective attention.

Why NYC and Why Now?

The city with the nation’s largest school district has pushed the literacy starting line forward with its far-ranging initiative to improve literacy instruction: NYC Reads.³ Where approaches to literacy instruction once varied district-to-district, school-to-school, and even classroom-to-classroom, NYC Reads has enabled educators to leverage evidence-based curricula to deliver increasingly high-quality, grade-level instruction to all students. NYCPS has provided ongoing job-embedded professional learning and launched a comprehensive assessment system to support educators in strengthening the quality of their instruction and their ability to target students’ unique needs. Moreover, NYCPS has focused on developing and sustaining meaningful literacy-focused partnerships with families through the dissemination of Spread the Word: A NYC Reads Family Partnership Toolkit⁴ and through the launch of the NYC Reads Ambassadors program, which has trained 1,000+ caregivers in the science of reading.⁵ And while any curricular change is challenging, educators have reported positive attitudes toward their evidence-based curricula,⁶ and have stated that the initiative has brought fresh coherence to their work and opened opportunities to improve alongside peers within and beyond their school buildings.

Beyond the efforts specific to NYCPS and NYC Reads, New York City boasts a remarkably diverse and extensive ecosystem of actors leading literacy work from a variety of angles. Alongside governmental agencies, hundreds of organizations support literacy for New York City community members of all ages, in and out of school, and seek to bolster and sustain the literacy environment in which children grow. Moreover, in addition to carrying forward their independent activities, there is a history of effective collaborative action across these organizations. For instance, between 2013 and 2018, United Way’s Read NYC initiative brought together schools, community-based organizations, and families to collaboratively strengthen literacy outcomes for students in the South Bronx. The effort achieved a 400 percent improvement in literacy outcomes in participating schools.⁷ Similarly, since 2014, the Pinkerton- and Carmel Hill-sponsored NYC Reads neighborhood initiative has brought together in- and out-of-school providers to collaboratively strengthen literacy learning in East Harlem, East New York, and South Jamaica.⁸ Established in 2014, New York City Council’s City’s First Readers connects nearly twenty nonprofits that provide direct services to families to support children’s early literacy development; in 2023, the network reached nearly one million families.⁹

Together, these efforts suggest that NYC is well-positioned to expand collective action for literacy to reach all of our school-aged children. Still, one might wonder whether this is the right moment for collective action around literacy. At the city, state, and federal levels, political challenge and potential instability loom large. Schools are struggling to support an increasingly diverse student population with a dwindling educator workforce. Families are grappling with the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is, to put it mildly, a lot going on in the world. In the face of these challenges—why now?

The current moment is marked with energy and urgency. All eyes are on New York City as it collects data showing the impact of NYC Reads. For both New York City students and for students nationwide, it is essential that New York City fortify the case for the science of reading. Additionally, as

generative AI transforms the learning landscape, emerging technologies offer fresh mechanisms to scale personalized literacy instruction while also risk distracting educators from the key tenets of strong instruction, creating more distance between home and school, or worst of all, further entrenching biases against our most vulnerable students. What's more, it is not only literacy that hangs in the balance. New York City and districts nationwide are launching efforts to improve equitable access to high-quality instruction in other subjects as well (e.g., NYC Solves).¹⁰ Showing that collective instructional improvement efforts can work in literacy—and elevating lessons learned and effective practices—will set the stage for nationwide improvement across states, districts, grades, and subjects alike.

What do we need to do?

All-in-all, the City is primed for transformative impact in literacy, and the moment and need are here. Thus, the question becomes, what exactly needs to be done—and how can we do it together?

To understand how to maximize the moment and expand collaborative action across the ecosystem, CPRL used a participatory process to pursue the following question: What might it take to make New York City the best place to learn to read and write? We reviewed the literature, conducted 100+ interviews, and met with over 300 ecosystem leaders to understand the current ecosystem of literacy. In these sessions, we gauged interest in collaboration on an ecosystem effort, invited participants to help co-design a roadmap for those efforts, and solicited advice on the necessary conditions and ingredients based on their experiences.

Using these learnings, we drafted and revised a vision, or “roadmap,” for reaching our shared goal: ensuring all New York City school-aged children become thriving readers. The roadmap contains (1) a problem statement, (2) an ambitious but achievable goal, (3) seven cross-cutting objectives needed to reach that goal, and (4) provisional metrics to

understand progress and impact. Below, we outline these components and provide the research underlying them. The objectives are divided into solution objectives (what we think it will take to achieve the goal), and accelerant objectives (the conditions necessary to drive toward this goal).

Much of the work outlined in the roadmap is already well underway. However, the research revealed that all too often, the work is occurring in silos and the efforts—while powerful—have not yet extended to reach the City's approximately one million school-age children. Achieving literacy for all of these children requires coordination, bringing into sync the disparate—and sometimes competing—actions of individual organizations, and drawing more to the effort. NYCPS's commitment to evidence-based instruction through the NYC Reads initiative is key. But, achieving a bold literacy goal requires the public and private sectors—including the public schools,¹¹ community organizations, government, and funders—to work together toward a common vision. It requires commitment to supporting the City's public schools and schools and outside organizations establishing deep and meaningful partnerships that advance a shared goal and vision.

Goal: By 2035, all school-aged youth in New York City are fully literate: able to read, write, listen, and speak in ways that allow them to achieve their goals and develop their knowledge and potential.

1

Start young.

The earliest years of a child's life set a critical foundation for academic success. To prepare young children for kindergarten, families should have access to knowledge and resources to support their children's early language and literacy development, including appropriate developmental screenings, access to books and exposure to oral language, and high-quality preschool experiences.

1.1 Screen children for developmental disabilities prior to kindergarten entry.¹²

According to the CDC, about 1 in 6 children have a developmental or behavioral disability, and early intervention can improve children's outcomes.¹³

1.2 Support families to talk, listen, and/or read with their children every day, starting at birth.¹⁴

Reading aloud to children increases vocabulary exposure for young children, especially children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, with some studies finding that parent-child reading is the 'single most important activity' to set the foundation for later literacy success.¹⁵

1.3 Provide young children with high-quality (grade-level, science of reading-aligned, culturally responsive) early childhood educational experiences.

Attending a high-quality preschool program is a significant predictor of future academic success, particularly for students furthest from opportunity, and the results are stronger when coupled with family support.¹⁶

2

Maximize reading and writing in and out of school.

While classroom instruction is a critical lever for literacy development, students also need opportunities to build vocabulary and knowledge outside of school hours.

2.1 Provide students with high-quality (grade-level, science of reading-aligned, culturally responsive) literacy learning opportunities, with a focus on meeting the needs of diverse learners, including multilingual learners and students with disabilities.

Core reading curriculum and instructional materials should include explicit instruction in foundational reading skills aligned to grade-level standards, while also supporting knowledge building and academic language acquisition.¹⁷ In addition, some students require further intervention to become thriving readers; to meet all students' needs, schools should utilize Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), a tiered system of evidence-based interventions that relies on effective and reliable universal screening and assessment, progress monitoring, and data-based decision-making to provide support to students who may be "at-risk" for reading difficulties.¹⁸ Targeted support for multilingual learners should be aligned to best practices for English Language Learner (ELL) instruction, to guide these students to develop English language proficiency while also supporting literacy development.¹⁹

2.2 Monitor students' literacy proficiency and use that information to refine instructional efforts for students in all grades.

Progress monitoring and formative assessments, when bolstered by appropriate professional learning, are essential to enable educators to identify where individual students need support, and to tailor their instruction and interventions accordingly.²⁰

2.3 Create coherence (i.e., consistent approaches to literacy instruction) within and across learning environments, in and out of schools.

Increasing coherence within a system of core instruction, assessment, and intervention, including external literacy learning environments such as afterschool programs, increases student achievement more effectively than a myriad of disconnected programs of limited duration.²¹

2.4 Build family-school partnerships focused on literacy.

Caregiver involvement positively contributes to students' development of early literacy skills, and that involvement is more effective when coordinated and supported by teachers and schools, particularly when sustained over time.²²

2.5 Identify, test, and continue to develop and use technological innovations to support high-quality literacy instruction, personalized learning, operational improvements, and effective use of data.

Growing awareness of the body of scientific research on how children learn to read has led to significant shifts nationwide in literacy instruction. As research continues to evolve and new educational technology tools emerge, educators must also evolve their practice.

3

Mobilize our literacy-rich communities.

New York City is one of the most racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse geographic areas in the world, and children do not learn in a vacuum. On average, children spend less than 20 percent of their time in school.²³ Their family contexts, cultural and religious communities, and the unique features and institutions of their neighborhoods all contribute to children's literacy development, including building background knowledge and vocabulary. Mobilizing these community resources can bolster the impact of in-school literacy efforts.

3.1 Celebrate and leverage children's curiosities, backgrounds, and experiences to cultivate joy in reading.

When educators and families identify and build on children's personal interests to help them select reading material, children are more interested in choosing reading and are more motivated to persist through reading challenges.²⁴

3.2 Celebrate families' cultures, languages, and experiences as sources of literacy.

Almost half of New York City residents speak a language other than English at home.²⁵ Multilingual supports help children from diverse linguistic backgrounds maintain their native languages while acquiring new ones, promoting cognitive flexibility and improving overall literacy outcomes.²⁶ Broadly, supporting children's development in their home languages and capitalizing on families' cultural assets is beneficial to children's literacy development at home and school.²⁷

3.3 Promote literacy efforts aligned to those in schools via cultural and other city institutions (e.g., libraries, museums), and 3.4 Promote literacy efforts aligned to those in schools via local businesses, religious centers, and community spaces.

Libraries provide free access to diverse reading materials, and museums help children develop background knowledge and comprehension skills through interactive exhibits. Children encounter new vocabulary in these institutions as well as in the local businesses, religious and community centers where they spend time. These spaces are crucial for a citywide effort to build a shared "culture of literacy", where adults model reading for joy and pleasure, as well as engaging with and using text in daily life.²⁸

4

Build the will.

An effort of this scale and ambition will require that diverse actors across the ecosystem are motivated to do the challenging work to change outcomes for New York City school-age children.

4.1 Disseminate literacy progress and outcome data and compelling narratives around literacy's benefits, and use incentive structures to support literacy efforts.

Our sector is too often plagued by a gap between policy and evidence, which allows for a sustained disconnect between policy development and effective practice.²⁹ Moreover, inconsistent assessment systems and opaque approaches to sharing student outcome data between school, home, and other academic supporters mean that many key ecosystem actors are left unaware of the scale of the challenges children face with respect to literacy learning.³⁰ Thus, a precursor to motivating key actors to engage in this work involves making the current reality clear. We need to make literacy data accessible to equip educators, policymakers, community organizations, and families to identify specific areas where literacy support is most needed. And then, once data is accessible, we need additional incentives to promote far-ranging engagement in the work.

4.2 Generate political demand via advocacy campaigns composed of diverse coalitions to mobilize political leaders to advance research-backed literacy policy.

Cultivating political demand for action in the interest of literacy will help ensure that it remains a policy priority despite changes in administration and that public funds are allocated to support it.³¹

4.3 Cultivate literacy leadership at multiple system levels to champion literacy and enable initiative continuity.

A sustainable, long-term effort to expand literacy in New York City requires broad public and private support, even as the work faces expected implementation challenges.³² Political champions, including politicians, activists, and influential community members, can maintain ongoing attention to the goal of expanding literacy and help the efforts maintain momentum to overcome anticipated and unanticipated obstacles.

5

Bring (and keep) the talent.

To support high-quality literacy learning in and out of New York City classrooms, it is essential that we recruit strong teacher candidates, prepare educators to deliver evidence-based, high-quality learning experiences, and retain talent over time.

5.1 Recruit diverse candidates to serve in student-facing, family-facing, and systems-level roles.

Extensive research suggests that students benefit from the opportunity to learn from educators who share their race or ethnicity.³³ However, NYCPS demographic data indicate that current student demographics do not match teacher and school leadership demographics.³⁴ Thus, we must cultivate a diverse workforce, including by expanding college access and teacher pathways for all demographic groups.³⁵

5.2 Focus educator preparation programs' measures of educator readiness on delivery of high-quality literacy instruction.

Survey data from recent years suggests that the majority of early elementary teachers use literacy strategies that are not aligned to the science of reading.³⁶ New York state's educator preparation programs (EPPs) are lagging behind programs nationally with respect to preparing candidates to provide evidence-based literacy instruction.³⁷ The National Center on Teacher Quality rated EPPs on their coverage of evidence-based reading instruction—56 percent of programs in New York State received a failing grade.³⁸

5.3 Ensure in-service professional learning focuses on delivery of high-quality literacy programming (including instruction, multi-tiered levels of support, family partnership, and school-level systems and structures).

Educators and leaders need ongoing curriculum-based professional learning to deliver high-quality, evidence-based literacy instruction. This is especially true for educators who did not receive this support during pre-service training.³⁹

5.4 Provide ongoing mentorship, wellness support, and growth opportunities for educators in student-facing, family-facing, and systems-level roles.

We need to keep strong educators in front of children.⁴⁰ The crisis in educator turnover stands to worsen in New York City given mandated targets for class size reductions in the coming years.⁴¹ As a result, concerted efforts to provide the mentorship, wellness support, and growth opportunities that support retention are needed.⁴²

6

Activate and coordinate the resources.

To drive outcomes for students in a system where only half of the students read on grade level, additional resources (both financial and non-financial) are needed to encourage actors to do more of what works and systematically test new approaches where evidence is lacking.

6.1 Secure public, private, and philanthropic investment and deploy it to expand and deepen literacy efforts.

Public dollars alone are insufficient to help tackle the enormous literacy crisis in New York City, as are private and philanthropic investments concentrated on its specific components.

6.2 Use literacy investments to advance coordinated high-quality literacy efforts.

Siloed funding approaches, no matter how extensive, are unlikely to drive the massive change that is needed.⁴³ The ecosystem needs a strategic, coordinated approach to deploying these funds and shared mechanisms for measuring their impact and reallocating as needed over time.⁴⁴

7

Pinpoint challenges and improve.

To tackle New York City's literacy crisis, we need to spot the issues, big and small, understand what is causing them, and continuously refine our efforts based on what we learn.

7.1 Empower ground-level and system-level actors to identify barriers that impede literacy development and avenues for problem-solving, making data-informed and research-backed decisions.

Decades of research show that in striving toward any systems-level goal, it is essential to empower actors at all levels to speak up about the challenges that get in the way; not all barriers will be visible to those leading at the systems level, nor will the solutions that could help actors to clear those barriers.⁴⁵ As such, this effort to build a fully literate New York City school-age population needs structures that enable people from across the system, including those most directly impacted and those resistant to the effort, to engage in collaborative problem identification and solution generation.⁴⁶ This includes addressing resistance to the effort, whether born out of differing views on how to support children to read and write or simple aversion to change.⁴⁷

7.2 Develop key metrics (inclusive of those here), gather data against those metrics, and leverage the data for improvement.

Low rates of literacy and the systems that continue to enable them comprise a wicked problem.⁴⁸ None of us knows exactly what needs to be done to solve it. Thus, we have no choice but to build a hypothesis for how we might achieve our desired impact, test that hypothesis, gather data on how effectively it works, and continue to improve based on what we learn.⁴⁹



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The Work Ahead

Literacy is not developed through schools alone. Achieving universal literacy requires a coordinated ecosystem—aligning early childhood, schools, families, communities, policy, talent, and resources—working toward a shared goal guided by a common roadmap. Together, we can make New York City the best place for young people to learn to read and write.

To get involved, contact CPRL at cpri@law.columbia.edu.



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