

What's working across the Cradle to Career Network

Outcome: Early Grade Reading



Essential Question: Do students have access to quality school environments, including quality curricula and instruction, experienced teachers, effective leaders and adequate funding?

Indicator: Access to quality resources to foster math and reading proficiency in grade 3

Impact

Early grade reading is a foundational skill for lifelong academic and social success, with strong evidence linking third-grade reading proficiency to high school graduation and college enrollment. Students who fall behind early are at significantly greater risk of not completing school, particularly among those from low-income and historically marginalized communities.

Learn to Earn Dayton, a member of the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network, is leading a regionwide implementation of the Science of Reading in Montgomery County, Ohio. Their goal is to ensure all students receive evidence-based literacy instruction that builds a strong academic foundation for students, closes achievement gaps and improves long-term educational outcomes. In addition to driving local change, they are also playing a key role at the state level by informing policy, aligning with statewide early literacy goals and advocating for broader systems change grounded in local implementation.

The Landscape

Across the country, states are taking action to improve early literacy through legislation relative to the Science of Reading, a research-based approach that emphasizes foundational skills like phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development and comprehension. As of 2024, at least 43 states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation, or adopted policies, requiring changes to curriculum, educator preparation and professional development.

This momentum reflects a national urgency: In 2022, only 33% of fourth graders across the U.S. scored at or above proficient in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). States like Mississippi and Tennessee have seen early gains by pairing legislation with investments in coaching and teacher training around the science of reading. Others, including Ohio, North Carolina and Indiana, are following suit, creating the systems-level conditions needed to improve reading outcomes, particularly for students who have been historically underserved.

The Strategy

As a place-based partnership rooted in community, Learn to Earn Dayton (L2ED) exemplifies how network members can drive impact at both the local and state levels. Their strong local relationships and systems focus positioned them to influence statewide literacy reform while ensuring effective implementation on the ground. L2ED, working with key regional partners, played a critical role in shaping Ohio's efforts by working with leaders like Representatives Tom Young and Andrea White to advocate for the inclusion of Science of Reading requirements in K-12 curricula and higher education. The partnership's collective efforts helped secure \$168 million in Ohio's 2023 state budget through House Bill 33, which mandated structured literacy curricula backed by scientific evidence and banned unproven instructional methods. The funding included \$86 million for educator training, \$64 million for high quality materials and \$18 million for literacy coaching. While the legislation created a strong foundation for reform, local partnerships like L2ED were essential to making the policy real in classrooms across the state. Building on statewide momentum, L2ED leveraged the Science of Reading as the foundation for a regional strategy to close literacy gaps and improve reading outcomes. At the county level, the regional partner Montgomery County Educational Service Center (MCESC) provided professional development and coaching to more than 300 educators, equipping them with tools to implement structured literacy practices.

At the district level, the partnership supported curriculum adoption committees by reviewing and recommending materials aligned with House Bill 33 requirements. They collaborated with district leaders to design implementation plans that included professional learning communities, coaching cycles and milestone tracking to monitor progress. These supports extended directly into classrooms, where teachers received targeted training and coaching to embed Science of Reading-aligned practices in daily instruction.

At the school level, literacy coaches housed at the MCESC worked side-by-side with teachers to model effective instruction, provide continuous support and use student data to inform teaching. School leaders also received implementation toolkits and participated

in monthly learning sessions to build capacity for leading literacy reform at the building level.

The regional organizations in the partnership also collaborated with postsecondary institutions to ensure that teacher preparation programs were grounded on structured and evidenced –based literacy principles. Understanding the importance of consistency, elements of the Science of Reading have been incorporated into standing programs and projects led by L2ED, including training and support for educators who serve students in summer, afterschool and place-based community programs. This layered approach illustrates how data and strategy flowed from state to county to local systems, enabling consistent alignment from policy to practice.

Building on Early Results

Early results in Ohio and Dayton suggest this work is driving real progress. From 2022 to 2024, third grade reading proficiency in Ohio rose from 66% to 68% while Dayton Public Schools saw gains from 38% to 40%. As other communities look to strengthen early literacy outcomes, Learn to Earn Dayton's comprehensive approach from policy advocacy to classroom implementation offers a compelling model for how systems alignment, strategic investment and evidence-based practices can lead to measurable and lasting results.

