

Educate Maine

Reading at Grade Level by Third Grade Is Imperative

High-quality early reading instruction is key to students' success



Acknowledgements

Educate Maine is a Maine-based, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that champions career readiness by increasing the educational attainment of Maine people, enabling all students to succeed in postsecondary education and in the workplace.

Educate Maine advances education policies and practices that prepare Maine students to be the next generation of productive, engaged citizens.

- Educate Maine engages in **outreach and advocacy** to advance education policies and practices that prepare Maine students for postsecondary learning and the workforce.
- Educate Maine **reports and analyzes data**, the foundation of sound policies.
- Educate Maine **convenes** education, business, and policy leaders to come up with innovative solutions to Maine's education and workforce challenges.
- Educate Maine **manages programs** that help us achieve our mission and realize our vision for Maine.

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Authors

Tawanda Bandy Fattah, Research & Policy Consultant, STORIES & COUNTS

Jason Judd, Ed.D. former Executive Director, Educate Maine

Jodi Mezzanotte, M.Ed., former Director of Educator Engagement, Educate Maine

Kim Russell, Director of Special Projects, Educate Maine

Contributors

Katherine Johnston, MPPM, Independent Researcher/Consultant

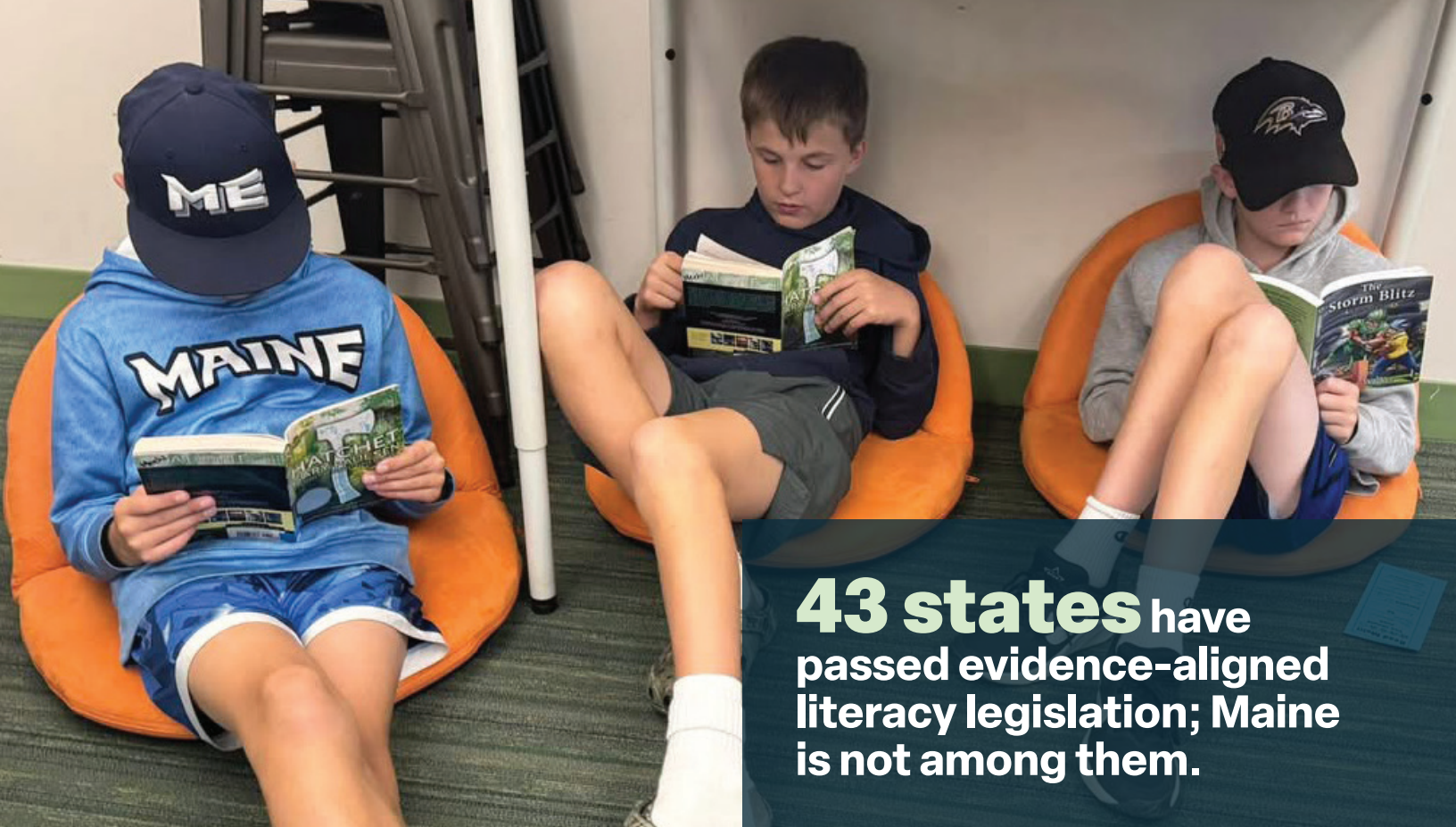
Yvonne Koons, President/Senior Designer, Rogue Graphic Design

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43 states have passed evidence-aligned literacy legislation; Maine is not among them.

Summary

Educate Maine conducted a study between September 2025 and May 2026 to learn more about how teachers are teaching our youngest students to read. This study addresses a data gap on what reading curricula are being used in Maine elementary schools. This report describes what Educate Maine learned about the use of science-aligned reading programs among responding Maine school districts, including differences in program use, instructional time, educator capacity, and implementation practices.

Reading at grade level by the end of third grade is a pivotal milestone that shapes a child's future educational trajectory. Children who read proficiently by the end of third grade are better positioned for continued academic success because reading is an essential skill necessary for

every other academic subject.¹ Strong early language and literacy skills provide the foundation for this milestone, supporting school readiness, academic achievement, and workforce readiness.² Research shows that students who are not reading at grade level by fourth grade are more likely to struggle academically throughout their school years and to drop out of school, can have trouble securing gainful employment, and are at higher risk of being involved in criminal activity.³

Despite the importance of early literacy and evidence-based instruction, too many children in Maine are not reading proficiently by fourth grade.⁴ On the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 26 percent of Maine fourth-grade students performed at or above the proficient level.⁵ Maine's 1992 NAEP fourth-grade reading scores ranked second in the nation.⁶ Maine has now dropped to 44th among the 50 states.⁷



Reversing the reading decline will require state- and district-level leadership, with focused attention on the elementary school years, particularly K-3. Achieving strong literacy outcomes requires a comprehensive approach that extends beyond curriculum adoption. Effective literacy instruction depends on the combination of three essential elements: high-quality instructional materials aligned to the science of reading, well-prepared educators who receive ongoing coaching and professional learning, and supportive implementation conditions that include sufficient instructional time and targeted interventions for students who need additional support.⁸ When these elements are included and sustained, schools are better positioned to provide the effective literacy instruction children need to become proficient readers.

In recent years, educators across the country have learned that many popular reading curricula are not based on research about how children learn to read. In contrast, science-aligned reading curricula are carefully based on that research.

The Educate Maine study found that Maine schools are not yet consistently using high-quality instructional materials aligned to the science of reading. Educate Maine's data shows that many Maine schools use multiple literacy teaching tools, including

misaligned programs, and teachers often lack the professional development and guided practice with high-quality instructional materials necessary to achieve the highest outcomes for their students. Lack of consistent literacy instructional time is also a challenge in some districts.

Understanding where districts are making progress, where challenges remain, and what conditions support effective implementation should help inform continued efforts to strengthen literacy outcomes across Maine.

Importance of early literacy

Strong early literacy skills provide the foundation for children's academic success and lifelong learning. Reading at grade level by the end of third grade is a critical milestone because, beginning in fourth grade, students increasingly rely on reading as a tool for learning across all subject areas.⁹ Students who develop strong reading skills early are better prepared to access grade-level content and achieve continued academic success.¹⁰ On the other hand, students who have not mastered reading often struggle and fall behind.

The benefits of early literacy extend well beyond academic achievement. Strong reading skills are associated with higher rates of high school graduation,¹¹ greater workforce participation and earnings,¹² improved health outcomes,¹³ and increased civic engagement.¹⁴ Conversely, children who struggle to read proficiently are at greater risk of school disengagement and involvement with the juvenile and criminal justice systems.¹⁵ These long-term outcomes underscore why early literacy is not only an educational priority, but also an investment in Maine's future workforce, economy, and communities.

“ Learning to read is a right that we must promote. By providing a solid foundation in early reading skills and strategies, we offer learners countless opportunities for all future success. Teaching to read must be our highest priority, and our greatest joy.”



Dr. Peter Lancia
Westbrook
Superintendent of
Schools, literacy
specialist and Chair
of the Maine Literacy
Advisory Council



Early literacy development begins well before children become independent readers. Essential literacy skills, according to research—including oral language development, phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—provide the building blocks children need to become proficient readers.¹⁶

Effective literacy instruction intentionally develops these skills through explicit, systematic, and evidence-based approaches that support how children learn to read.

States that have prioritized evidence-based literacy instruction demonstrate the potential for improved literacy outcomes when policies, instructional practices, and implementation supports are aligned. Mississippi, for example, has paired high-quality instructional materials with statewide teacher professional training in the science of reading, literacy coaches, and early intervention efforts.¹⁷ Since 2013, Mississippi has achieved the nation’s largest gains in fourth-grade reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) rankings, improving from 49th in the nation to 9th in 2024.¹⁸ Connecticut has similarly invested in statewide implementation of science-aligned reading instruction, teacher training, and high-quality instructional materials¹⁹ while achieving fourth-grade reading performance above the national average.²⁰ **The majority of states (43), many of which consider themselves “strong local control” states, have passed evidence-aligned literacy legislation in recent years; Maine is not among them.**²¹

Maine reading outcomes need improvement

State and national assessment results indicate that too many Maine students are not reading proficiently. Results from the Maine Through Years Assessment (MTYA) show that statewide fourth-grade reading performance has remained stagnant over the past few years. The percentage of fourth graders meeting or exceeding grade-level reading was 63.9 percent in

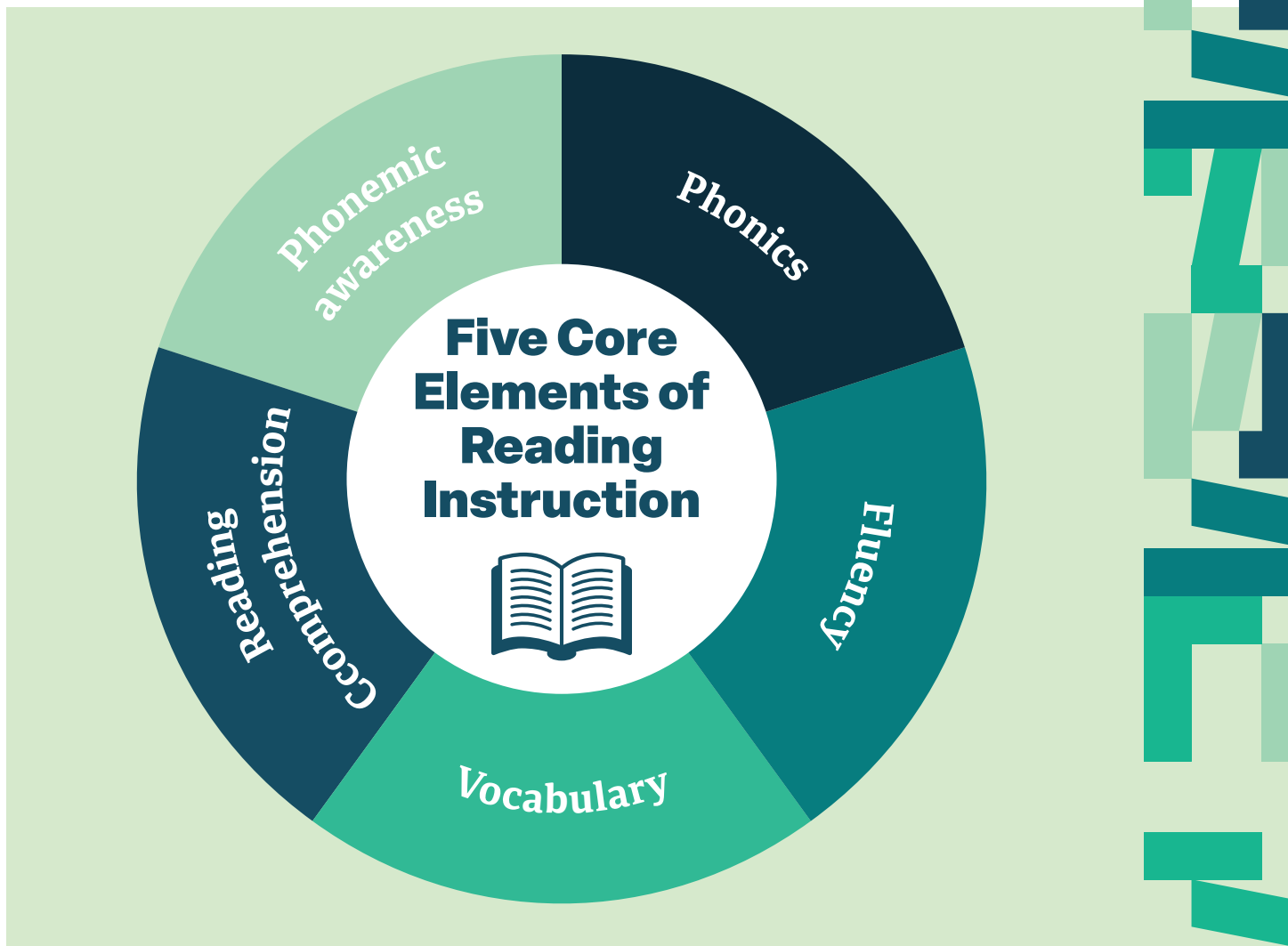


2023, 64.2 percent in 2024, and 63.7 percent in 2025.²² MTYA data from Spring 2026 shows fourth-grade reading scores remain relatively flat (average scores are 202, 204, 204, 205 from 2023 to 2026; a 1.5 percent increase from 2023 to 2026).²³ It's not possible to compare state test scores across longer time periods, as Maine has used at least five different state assessments since 2005.²⁴

Results from the NAEP provide additional context by tracking fourth-grade reading performance over time and comparing Maine with other states. Looking at proficiency rates, approximately 26 percent of Maine fourth-grade students performed at or above the NAEP proficient level in 2024, down from 36 percent in 2019—a 10 percentage point drop.²⁵ In 2024, Maine had the state's lowest fourth-grade reading score since NAEP reporting began in 1992.²⁶ NAEP scores tell a dramatic story of Maine's decline in average fourth-grade reading scores, falling from near the top of the nation

(second only to New Hampshire) in 1992²⁷ to close to the bottom (44th) in 2024.²⁸ Maine currently has the lowest percentage of fourth grade students scoring at or above proficient in reading in New England. Although reading achievement has declined nationally, Maine's continued decline in fourth-grade reading performance reinforces the importance of strengthening early literacy instruction and improving reading outcomes.

Although the state and national assessments measure reading achievement in different ways, both point to the need for sustained efforts to improve early literacy outcomes across the state. At best, more than one-third (36 percent on Maine's own assessment, MTYA) of fourth graders are failing to meet grade-level reading. Taken together, these assessments demonstrate that improving reading proficiency must remain one of Maine's most pressing educational priorities.



Evidenced-based instruction can improve reading achievement

Over the past five decades, a substantial body of research has demonstrated that explicit, systematic instruction in foundational literacy skills is the most effective way to help children become proficient readers.²⁹ This research has led many states to place greater emphasis on science-aligned reading instruction as the foundation for early literacy.³⁰

The science of reading “is a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing.”³¹ Science-aligned

reading instruction applies this research to classroom practice. It emphasizes explicit instruction in essential reading skills (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension), opportunities for students to practice and apply those skills, ongoing assessment of student progress, and targeted support when students need additional instruction.³² When delivered effectively, science-aligned reading instruction helps students develop the skills needed to read accurately, fluently, and with understanding.

While high-quality reading materials aligned to the science of reading provide an essential foundation for literacy instruction, materials alone do not improve reading

outcomes. Effective literacy instruction requires alignment among high-quality science-based reading materials, well-prepared educators supported through ongoing professional learning and coaching, and supportive implementation conditions that include sufficient instructional time and targeted student interventions.³³ Together, these elements create the conditions necessary for students to become proficient readers.

Maine has made some important investments to strengthen literacy instruction, including a \$10 million investment in literacy grants in 2024 intended to help schools implement high-quality instructional materials and expand professional learning on science-aligned reading instruction.³⁴ These efforts have helped expand the use of these materials and strengthen educator capacity across the state, but there is an urgent need for additional progress. Continued progress will require state- and district-level leadership; focused attention on elementary schools, particularly K-3, ensuring that all districts use high-quality instructional materials aligned to the science of reading; educators have the training and instructional support needed to implement those programs effectively; and students receive universal screenings, consistent literacy instruction, and targeted support when additional intervention is needed.

As interest in science-aligned reading instruction has grown, many Maine school districts have begun adopting high-quality reading instructional materials designed to translate this research into classroom practice. The present study examined progress toward that goal.

The Educate Maine study

In late 2025 through mid 2026, Educate Maine conducted a landscape survey of

“Creating a literate society is an economic and social imperative. Investments in early literacy are needed to ensure that we get it right for all students. This should be one of Maine’s top public policy goals.”



Tony DiMarco
Chair, Educate Maine
Board of Directors
and retired executive
at IDEXX



Maine public school districts that include elementary schools, to examine the adoption and use of high-quality instructional materials aligned with the science of reading. The survey asked districts about their early literacy curricula, including 26 science-based reading programs identified by Educate Maine using independent curriculum reviews from EdReports³⁵ and reports from The Reading League.³⁶ Districts were asked which K-3 reading programs they use, the length of



time those programs have been in use, instructional frequency and dosage, educator challenges and supports, and implementation plans and practices. Unless otherwise noted, findings presented in the following sections are based on responses from districts that completed the survey. The survey was sent to all 155 public school districts currently teaching K-3 students. Of those, 93 districts responded, plus the Director of Education in the Unorganized Maine Territories, yielding a response rate of 60 percent, representing 70 percent of Maine's elementary schools, and including schools from every Maine county.

The study also included five regional focus groups with K-3 teachers teaching diverse student populations (one in Washington County, one in Somerset County, one in Penobscot County, and two in Cumberland County), a follow-up survey with select superintendents and elementary school principals from the focus group districts, and conversations with six higher education institutions (public and private) that award elementary education degrees.

NOTE: The Educate Maine report complements, with a greater focus on K-3 literacy, more recent data, and a higher response rate, the 2024 Maine Education Policy Research Institute's (MEPRI) report on the use of instructional programs in Maine schools. The MEPRI report was based on a 2023 survey of teachers examining K-5 literacy and math.³⁷

Maine's adoption of science-aligned reading instructional materials

The Educate Maine survey results indicated that 46 different reading programs are being used across responding districts.³⁸ Across the districts, a wide variety of programs were used; no single program was most common. Some of the programs address all five core elements of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension), while other programs focus on a more narrow scope or specific skills.



RSU 22 is a model for implementing science-based reading practices

The RSU 22 elementary schools in Hampden and Winterport are one example of a school district demonstrating a strong commitment to improving early literacy outcomes through the implementation of science-based reading practices and structured literacy instruction. Across grades K–3, teachers are using established literacy programs and instructional routines to provide students with explicit foundational skills instruction, targeted small-group supports, purposeful read-aloud experiences, and opportunities for independent reading.

A particular strength of the district's work is its commitment to implementing science-based literacy programming with fidelity. Teachers are working to follow the core components and instructional sequence of the adopted programs so that students receive consistent, systematic instruction across classrooms and grade levels. This commitment to fidelity creates important coherence and helps ensure that evidence-based practices are implemented as intended. Fidelity also allows teachers to thoughtfully consider how to address individual student needs, engagement, pacing, and areas where additional support may be necessary.

The district's investment in hands-on in-class coaching, and professional learning has also been a significant strength. Teachers spoke very positively about the in-person support provided by a literacy coach consultant, particularly opportunities for lesson modeling, co-teaching, classroom observation, and reflective debriefing. This practical, classroom-based coaching has helped teachers deepen their understanding of effective literacy instruction and strengthen implementation.

RSU 22 also benefits from highly reflective educators who are carefully examining student data, instructional pacing, curriculum effectiveness, assessment practices, and alignment with the Maine Learning Results. Their thoughtful feedback demonstrates a clear commitment to continuous improvement.

Overall, RSU 22 is a strong example of how a district has built a solid foundation for literacy growth by investing in science-based programming, fidelity of implementation, effective coaching, and collaborative professional learning. By continuing to strengthen coherence, expand support for foundational skills beyond first grade when needed, and provide sustained, job-embedded professional development, RSU 22 is well positioned to continue advancing literacy outcomes for all students.

Educate Maine found:

- 26 (56.5%) of the identified 46 programs are science-based reading programs
- 10 (21.7%) are scored as not science-aligned, mixed, partial, or debated
- 10 (21.7%) are not rated

Educate Maine found:

- 18 percent of districts are using a science-based program or programs, and no misaligned or unrated programs
- 67 percent of districts are using a science-based program or programs, but are also using a misaligned or unrated program or programs
- 15 percent of districts are using only misaligned or unrated programs

In addition, Educate Maine found:

- 74 (80%) districts use more than one reading program; some with up to five different programs
- 62 (67%) of these districts are using at least one science-based program
- 19 (20%) districts are using just one reading program, 17 of which are using science-based programs

Maine's use of science-aligned reading programs varies across districts

The Educate Maine survey found that practices varied across participating school districts. Nearly two-thirds of participating school districts using at least one science-based reading program reported using it for two years or less, indicating that many districts remain in the early stages of implementation. Across participating school districts, the frequency and duration of science-based reading instruction also

varied. While the vast majority (81.5 percent) reported delivering science-based reading programs five days per week, daily instructional time ranged from 10 to 150 minutes, with a median of 30 minutes. (Experts note that a daily core literacy block of 90-120+ minutes might be required.³⁹) These differences can influence the amount of time available for explicit instruction, guided practice, and independent application.

Because survey findings reveal that many of the school districts are still in the early stages of implementation, sustained implementation will likely be important to realizing the full benefits of science-aligned reading instruction in Maine. For example, the “Mississippi Miracle” did not happen overnight. When the state reading legislation was passed in 2013, Mississippi ranked 49th in the nation on NAEP fourth-grade reading scores. By 2022 they ranked 21st, and by 2024, 9th.⁴⁰ Consistent implementation by fully-trained teachers who receive ongoing coaching and leadership training, supported by sufficient instructional time, are required for students to make sustained progress toward reading proficiency.

Building educator capacity for science-aligned reading instruction is essential

As Maine districts continue expanding the use of high-quality instructional materials aligned to the science of reading, strengthening educator capacity will also be essential to improving literacy outcomes.

Ongoing professional learning and coaching can help educators deepen their understanding of science-aligned reading instruction, become more proficient in using these instructional materials, analyze student progress, and adjust instruction in



response to students' learning needs.⁴¹ Strengthening both preservice teacher preparation and ongoing professional support can help ensure that educators enter classrooms with a strong foundation in evidence-based literacy instruction while continuing to refine their instructional practice throughout their careers.

Building educator capacity is one of the most important investments Maine can make to improve literacy outcomes. When educators receive high-quality preparation, sustained professional learning, and ongoing instructional support, districts are better positioned to implement high-quality instruction aligned to the science of reading consistently and effectively, helping more students achieve reading proficiency by the end of third grade. Forty-four states have passed legislation that requires teachers to receive training in the science of reading; Maine is not among them.⁴²

Literacy coaches are a particularly important investment and were one of the factors underlying Mississippi's reading improvement success story.⁴³ Around the nation, 28 states and Washington, DC have implemented literacy coaching to some degree, with Alabama fully implementing it (meaning: "literacy coaches are trained in the science of reading and are assigned to each elementary school to provide job-embedded professional development and coaching to K-3 teachers.").⁴⁴

Strengthening science-aligned reading instruction in Maine: Recommendations

The Educate Maine study findings presented in this report suggest that the state has made recent progress in expanding the adoption of high-quality instructional materials aligned to the science of reading. Yet, fifteen percent of responding districts have not adopted

high-quality instructional materials aligned to the science of reading at all. In other districts, a high-quality program has been added, but is part of a large mix of programs, some of which are counter to the science of reading. Many districts have only

recently begun using science-based reading programs and they have not yet been fully implemented. Many school leaders and teachers have not been fully trained in the science that underlies the programs, or trained in how to use them.

The following recommendations outline the steps needed to improve early literacy outcomes for Maine children.



Recommendation 1:

All school districts across Maine must use high-quality instructional materials aligned to the science of reading



Recommendation 2:

Teachers and leaders must receive comprehensive training in the science of reading. Teachers must then receive ongoing skilled literacy coaching on their reading instruction



Recommendation 3:

Students must receive universal screening, effective literacy instruction, ongoing assessments with a consistent instrument to measure progress, and targeted support when additional intervention is needed

Continuing to address these priorities can help Maine build on recent progress and move toward sustained, high-quality instruction. This, in turn, can help ensure that more Maine children become proficient readers by the end of third grade and are prepared to succeed in school and beyond.

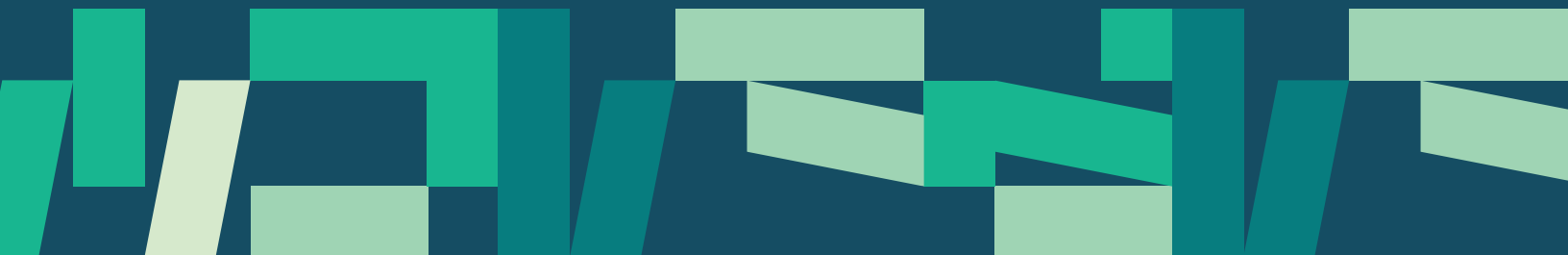
Conclusion

Improving early literacy is not solely an education issue; it is also an investment in Maine's future workforce, economic competitiveness, and public safety. By continuing to invest in science-aligned reading instruction, educator preparation and ongoing professional development, consistent instruction, and targeted support for struggling students, Maine can help ensure that more children become proficient readers by the end of third grade—strengthening opportunities for students while building a stronger future for the state.

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- 44** ExcelinEd. (n.d.) Early literacy fundamental principles adoption and implementation map. <https://earlyliteracymatters.org/literacy-map/>
States partially implementing literacy coaches: AK, AZ, AR, CA, CO, CT, DC, FL, GA, ID, IN, KY, LA, MD, MI, MS, MO, NE, NV, NM, NC, OH, OK, PA, SC, UT, VA, WI



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482 Congress St. / Suite 502 / Portland, ME 04101 / 207-751-0506