

# 6 Principles to Advance Equity in State Literacy Policy

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# Executive Summary

**If you're reading this, you possess a complex set of reading skills that help you make your way in the world, decoding and constructing meaning from words on pages, screens, and signs.**

Being able to read unlocks knowledge and opportunities, helps you effectively understand and communicate complex ideas, and distinguish fact from fiction. It's an essential prerequisite for succeeding in school, accessing strong job opportunities, and becoming an engaged and informed citizen of our democracy, and, as such, is a fundamental civil right.

And for strong readers, reading is so automatic that it's easy to take this ability for granted.

Yet, millions of children are systematically denied the right to read: Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), our "Nation's Report Card," consistently shows that too many students in the U.S. are below grade level in reading, and students from underserved backgrounds disproportionately so. The most recent results from 2024 indicate that only 30% of fourth grade students are proficient in reading — a number that's been largely stagnant for decades — and just 16% of Black students, 20% of Latino students, 8% of English learners, 10% of students with disabilities, and 19% of economically disadvantaged students can read proficiently by the fourth grade.

This is unacceptable and wholly avoidable when schools deliver high-quality reading instruction in a positive, inviting school environment and students have access to learning materials that reflect their identities. Sadly, that's not the norm, but it should be. **Every student should be taught to read with rigorous, diverse materials and evidence-based instructional practices and supports.**

While state and local leaders have become more engaged in this policy area over the past several years, more must be done to advance policies and practices that ensure that students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities are afforded the same opportunities and resources as their peers to become skillful, engaged readers. At the same time, bad actors at the federal and state levels are actively attacking civil rights, banning books and censoring authentic stories, and undercutting access to high-quality education, to the detriment of students' literacy development.

Advocates must demand evidence-based, comprehensive, and sustainable changes to ensure that every student learns to read. In this report, EdTrust outlines six principles to guide advocates as they work toward this goal.

## 1. Align Instruction and Curricula to Evidence-Based Practice

Research has revealed **a lot** about how students learn to read. And yet, not all students have access to instruction, curricula, assessments, and supports that are grounded in the science of reading. Advocates must push for state policies and coordinated implementation efforts that ensure that schools adopt, implement, and sustain evidence-based, culturally affirming instructional practices.

## 2. Connect Materials to Students' Identities and Interests

Representation in the classroom is not optional — it's essential. Advocates should demand instructional materials that reflect a fuller range of identities, experiences, and cultural assets of students. When students don't see themselves authentically portrayed in learning materials, they're less likely to feel engaged and motivated to read, which in turn, can undermine the development of complex reading skills. Connecting materials to students' identities and interests allows a wider range of students to draw upon their own experiences to help comprehend what they are reading.

## 3. Provide Equitable, Differentiated Supports

Schools must provide early, targeted, and differentiated interventions to students who require additional supports. But first schools need to collect strong data to ensure that supports are well tailored to students' needs. Strong supports also require strategic allocation of resources and educators who understand the unique additional supports that many multilingual learners, students with dyslexia, and struggling older readers may need. Advocates have an important role to play in ensuring that state policies enable effective and equitable systems of assessments and interventions to support all students in learning to read.

## 4. Begin at Birth

Advocates must push states to invest in high-quality, culturally responsive early learning and family literacy programs, especially in communities that have historically lacked equitable access to such programs. These early-childhood settings lay the foundation for young children to develop important "pre-literacy" skills.

## 5. Empower Educators

Teachers need preparation and strong, sustained professional learning that's rooted in the very best methods of teaching reading and supporting students' holistic literacy development. Advocates can push states to set a high bar for teacher preparation programs and ensure that professional development and job-embedded assistance is provided to educators once they are in the classroom, so that they can use evidence-based approaches to meet the needs of all learners.

## 6. Authentically Partner With Families

Families and schools are crucial partners in fostering children's reading development — yet families are often sidelined. Advocates can ensure that state policies require schools to provide clear and accessible information to families and involve them in creating actionable plans to support their children's reading development.

**Our hope is that that by focusing on these principles, we can end the literacy crisis and ensure that every student has access to the high-quality materials and reading instruction they need to become skilled, engaged readers.**

# 6 Principles to Advance Equity in State Literacy Policy

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## Introduction

**Literacy is a civil right.** Being able to read, write, and listen allows individuals to fully access information about the world around them, effectively communicate complex ideas, and distinguish fact from fiction. Literacy is the key to success in school and to accessing high-quality career opportunities. It is also fundamental to our democracy and to ensuring that all citizens are informed, engaged, and able to contribute to decision-making processes.

Unfortunately, too many students are denied the right to read and become literate individuals. Currently, the majority of our nation's students are below grade level in reading, and students from underserved backgrounds disproportionately so. Data from the most recent National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) showed that only 30% of fourth grade students are proficient in reading, and just 16% of Black students, 20% of Latino students, 8% of English learners, 10% of students with disabilities, and 19% of economically disadvantaged students can read proficiently by the fourth grade.<sup>1</sup>

Thankfully, we are at an important inflection point for how reading is taught in schools, and state leaders have become increasingly engaged in this policy area over the past several years. More than 40 states have passed laws related to reading instruction in the last decade,<sup>2</sup> leaning into their authority to establish statewide standards, support the use of high-quality, evidence-aligned curricula, and provide professional learning opportunities for educators. States also play a crucial role in supporting the implementation of these policies. These implementation efforts help school and district leaders operationalize major changes and support educators in delivering evidence-based instruction in a culturally affirming and engaging way, inspire a love of reading, and engage their students as active participants in their own literacy development.

**But more must be done to advance policies and practices that ensure that students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities are afforded the same opportunities and resources as their peers to become skillful, engaged readers.**

## *6 Principles to Guide Policy and Implementation*

In this resource, EdTrust outlines principles to guide advocates as they work to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to become skillful, engaged readers. These six principles provide a framework to guide the strategic priorities of advocacy efforts and are accompanied by initial policy recommendations [here](#).

## Unlocking Resources to Support & Sustain Equitable Literacy Development

The mechanics of *how* reading is taught in school fundamentally influence students' literacy development. Therefore, advocating for policy and evidence-based practices is necessary to ensure that all students develop into proficient readers. **But more equitable reading outcomes will only be achieved and sustained if advocates and policymakers *also* consider the numerous resources that impact students' experiences when learning to read.**

Fair and adequate funding is essential for unlocking the resources that support students' literacy development. Even the best investments in improving literacy outcomes can falter when school systems lack adequate funding to meet students' holistic needs. Adequate funding enables a robust culture of evidence-based reading instruction to take hold. Imagine how much harder it is for a chronically underfunded school district to recruit and retain strong, diverse educators, provide them with training and ongoing professional development in evidence-based instructional approaches, and replace outdated materials with high-quality, relevant curricular materials.

Plus, districts and schools make important resource allocation decisions that can *accelerate* or *inhibit* students' literacy development. For instance, a student's sense of belonging is a crucial prerequisite for learning. Consider how the overall school climate influences a student's experience while learning to read. If a student does not feel physically or emotionally safe, is unfairly disciplined due to stringent hardening policies, or is chronically absent, they will be unable to receive evidence-based reading instruction. This issue is particularly concerning, given that harmful — and often subjective — policies and practices [disproportionately](#) exclude students of color and students with disabilities from schools across the country.<sup>3</sup>

Advocates can use [The Alliance for Resource Equity](#) framework and toolkit to understand the additional factors that influence students' experiences when learning to read and write. They can also explore how a more equitable allocation of resources can lead to stronger literacy outcomes for all students.



## PRINCIPLE 1:

# Align Instruction and Curricula to Evidence-Based Practice

**State policies must ensure that all students learn to read in classrooms that use evidence-based reading instruction, curricula, assessments, and supports.**

We know a lot about how students learn to read, which involves acquiring word recognition, building language comprehension skills, and developing the skills that bridge them together.<sup>4</sup> In 2000, the National Reading Panel synthesized this extensive body of research and identified phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension as core skills possessed by all proficient readers.<sup>5</sup> Since then, our understanding of reading has continued to evolve. For instance, many scholars have highlighted research indicating that oral language development and background knowledge are also crucial to skillful, engaged reading.<sup>6</sup> Newer research, as well as studies from other disciplines, also suggest that learning to actively deploy reading strategies (self-regulation), and learning in a positive, culturally sustaining environment, are important for students' reading development.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, instruction in many classrooms does not universally reflect well-established research on how children learn to read. Across the country, children spend hours each day engaging with debunked curricula and instructional methods (e.g., balanced literacy approaches, three-cueing systems). Meanwhile, teachers [continue to learn](#) ineffective strategies in their pre-service programs and ongoing professional development.<sup>8</sup>

This limited access to evidence-based reading instruction and curricula disproportionately impacts students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. In [one study](#), white students in Boston attended schools with more reading specialists trained to provide the most intensive and effective reading supports compared to their Black and Latino peers.<sup>9</sup> Plus, families with additional resources have the expendable income to pay for [expensive private tutors](#)<sup>10</sup> who specialize in effective reading instruction, and/or to [pay thousands of dollars](#)<sup>11</sup> for independent evaluations that can be crucial to unlocking special education services for their students.

Additionally, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds disproportionately attend schools with high rates of [teacher and leader turnover](#) compared to their white and more affluent peers.<sup>12</sup> This churn raises a significant equity concern, as it can disrupt a school's ability to build the internal coherence, teacher knowledge, and buy-in necessary to use material that is aligned to grade-level standards, a key enabling condition that many districts [cite](#) as integral to their success in implementing evidence-based literacy efforts.<sup>13</sup>

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## What the Research Says

Learning to read is a complex process. Thankfully, an interdisciplinary research base known as the “science of reading,” which includes evidence from neuroscience, psychology, and education research offers considerable insight into how individuals learn how to read and write and identifies important patterns that have emerged across the literature over time. The science of reading features empirical evidence that dates back nearly 50 years, and just like other sciences, continues to develop over time. This body of research clearly indicates that:<sup>14</sup>

1. Nearly all children can learn to read.
2. There are several universally shared competencies among skillful readers: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary comprehension, oral language development, and background knowledge.
3. In the initial stages of learning to read, explicit, cumulative phonics instruction is necessary and nonnegotiable, though not sufficient in and of itself. Explicit, systematic instruction supports strong word recognition and decoding skills throughout students’ reading development.
4. Reading comprehension is a fundamental goal of reading.
5. The amount of knowledge a reader has about the information in a text influences their reading ability, particularly reading comprehension.
6. There is a reciprocal, overlapping relationship between “foundational skills” (i.e., decoding and phonics) and language comprehension. Important cognitive processes and skills help bridge these two areas. For instance, a reader’s ability to regulate their feelings, intentions, and thoughts (self-regulation), coordinate a range of neurological processes and actions (executive functioning), deploy various reading strategies, maintain motivation, and actively engage with text all influence their reading development.
7. A student’s cultural context<sup>15</sup> influences their reading development,<sup>16</sup> and all learning is inherently cultural. Students draw on previous knowledge of the world to situate their learning.<sup>17</sup>
8. A student’s socioemotional environment and development [influence](#) their reading development, as emotions and perceptions coexist with cognitive processes as students learn to read.<sup>18</sup>
9. Reading instruction that embeds rich and engaging learning opportunities, while addressing children’s interests, curiosities, and needs,<sup>19</sup> supports students’ reading development.<sup>20</sup>

See the glossary at the end of this document for additional information about the terms referenced above.

## ***How Can State Policy and Implementation Advance This Principle?***

Many state policies already require or incentivize districts to adopt evidence-aligned curricular materials. These policies establish a clear expectation that educators provide evidence-based instruction to their students.

However, state policies that encourage or require evidence-based instruction and curricula are not sufficient on their own. State education agencies play an important role in creating the conditions that support the sustained use of these materials and instructional approaches. To achieve this, state education agency officials can provide meaningful support and resources to assist districts in the selection, adoption, and effective implementation of high-quality reading curricula and instruction, thereby building students' wide-ranging literacy skills.

For example, state officials can produce tailored resources and guidance to support district and school leaders. This could include instructions on how to review curricular options across various grades for adherence to evidence-based reading approaches, as well as a vetted list of evidence-based materials. Lists of vetted curricular materials provide significant benefits to those responsible for procuring these materials: Instead of navigating a crowded curricular market on their own — where many publishers claim their materials “align to the science of reading” simply because it is trendy — district leaders and school boards can refer to a streamlined list of materials that have already been reviewed against several key indicators. This vetting process not only provides crucial information about how curricular options align with evidence-based instructional practices but also offers insights into how the curricular topics may resonate with a range of students' interests and backgrounds.

Lastly, state leaders play an important role in ensuring that districts provide educators with ongoing professional learning aligned with the evidence-based curricular materials used in their classrooms. Dedicated funding from the state can help incentivize the sustainability of these professional development opportunities, which are crucial for pairing evidence-aligned curricular materials with strong instructional practices, delivered by educators who feel empowered and confident in their expertise.

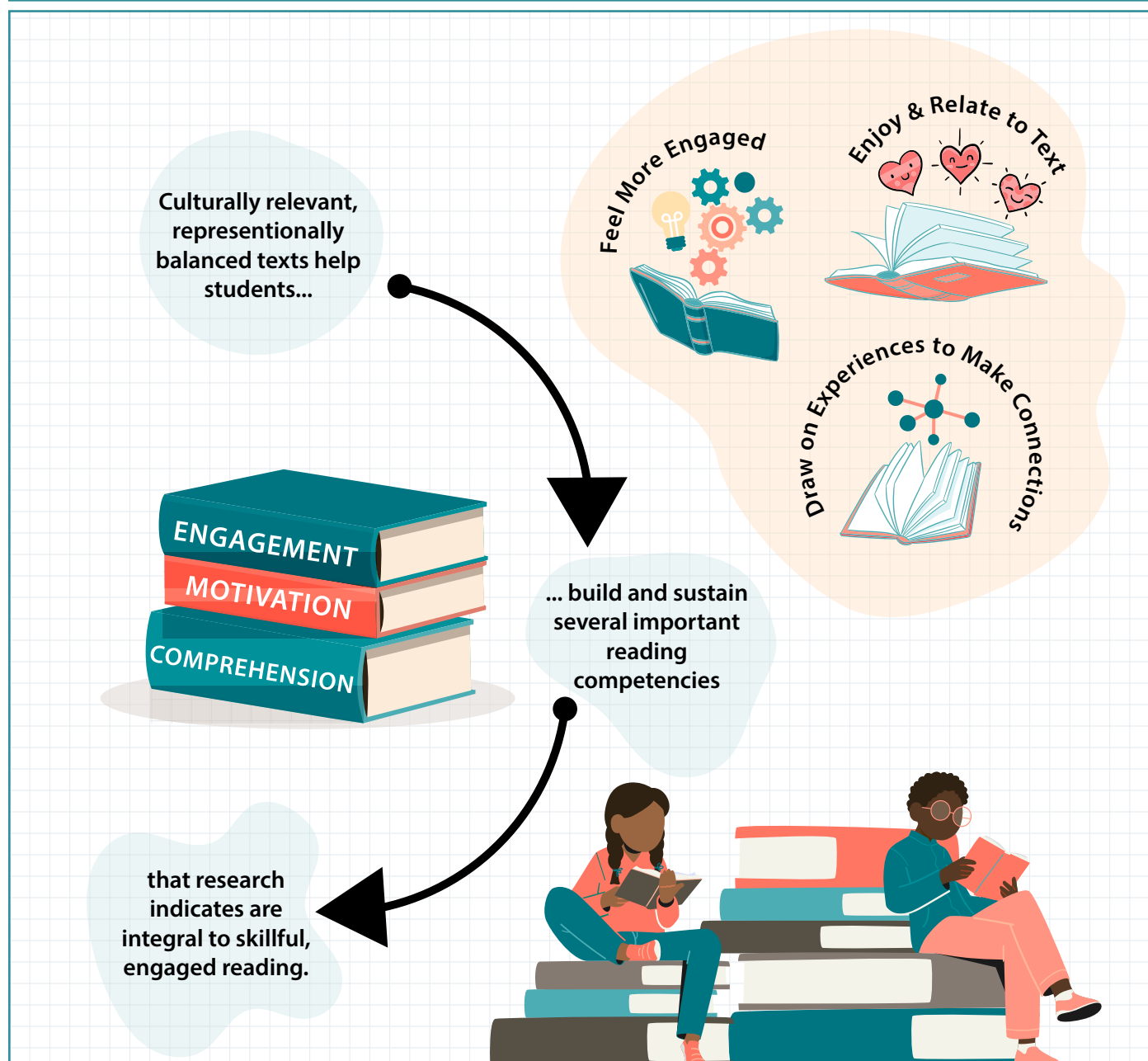


## PRINCIPLE 2: Connect Materials to Students' Identities and Interests

**State policies must encourage schools to use instructional materials and assessments that connect to all students' identities and interests.**

This is imperative to ensure that students of color and those from underrepresented backgrounds can connect their own experiences to their growth as readers. Studies show that culturally relevant texts can bolster comprehension skills, engagement, and motivation to read.

Defining what it means for a text to be culturally relevant is complicated. Advocates can use the [Tool for Representational Balance](#) as a starting point to assess how characters, groups, and concepts are portrayed in the grade school books used in their communities.



These skills are integral to students' literacy development. As it stands, however, the lack of diverse, representative instructional materials creates complex barriers that can prevent students from underserved backgrounds from building these competencies. This issue largely stems from the [lack of English language arts curricula](#) that feature authentic representations of students' identities and interests.<sup>21</sup> Representation in curricula remains predominantly white; white authors and characters are far more prevalent than those of any other race or ethnicity in grade school books. What's more, when people of color are included in these books, the characters are often portrayed in limited ways (e.g., characters are one-dimensional, negatively portrayed, or lack agency), and representations of groups and cultures of color often rely on stereotypes, are disconnected from individual people, or depict those groups as less than or unequal to others.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Inclusive Reading Assessments***

High-quality assessments generate data that evaluates students' reading strengths and areas for improvement. This data is essential for ensuring that schools can provide struggling students with evidence-based instruction and, when needed, more intensive interventions tailored to their needs.

However, a lack of racially and culturally relevant reading assessments may prevent all students from demonstrating what they know and can do. As a result, assessment results may provide an inaccurate snapshot of students' reading development, which can influence how teachers perceive their students, the instruction they provide, and the support these students receive.

Unfortunately, like curricular materials, many reading assessments are not designed to be racially or culturally inclusive.<sup>23</sup> However, some assessments are more effective than others in representing students' interests and identities, and state agencies play a vital role in incentivizing their adoption and use.

For example, reading assessments can be made more inclusive not only in the topics covered on the tests but also in how technical quality and rigor are measured. Assessment products undergo a range of additional checks and balances to ensure they meet technical quality standards. However, these safeguarding measures may inadvertently perpetuate a default whiteness as the standard against which they are judged. To address this issue, state legislators can look to California's SB114 Chapter 15.5, which requires the state board to consider several factors when formulating a list of screener assessments, including whether the proposed assessment was "normed and validated" — statistical provisions that ensure rigor and quality — using a sample of native English speakers *and* students whose home language is a language other than English. Considerations such as these help ensure that assessments meet technical quality standards while taking both native and non-native English speakers into account as reference points for conducting these statistical analyses. For additional recommendations on how advocates can push for inclusivity in assessments, see EdTrust's [advocates' guide](#).

Additionally, texts that authentically represent a wide array of backgrounds enable all students to learn about diverse cultures, many of which differ from their own. This exposure provides both "mirrors" and "windows," allowing students to gain a deeper understanding of their peers and the world around them.

## *Leveraging Background Knowledge*

Background knowledge and the ability of students to integrate prior knowledge with new information in a text are [vital components of reading comprehension](#).<sup>24</sup> This makes sense. When students have a deeper understanding of a topic or text, they are generally better equipped to comprehend what they are reading, draw connections to their own lives, and gain a richer understanding of new perspectives and information within the text. In this way, readers use their own connections, knowledge, and experiences as resources to make sense of a text.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, when underrepresented students do not see themselves authentically represented in materials, they have fewer opportunities to draw on prior experiences to situate their learning compared to their white and more represented peers.

## *Fostering Reading Motivation*

Many types of high-quality texts can serve as gateways to reading and literacy. A wide range of genres and forms of literature — such as graphic novels, magazines, poems, and plays — exposes students to the many vibrant worlds found on the written page. This argument also applies to the types of characters featured in texts. A more diverse reflection of students' identities and interests in instructional materials may enable students of color and students with underrepresented identities (including LGBTQ+ students, immigrant students, students impacted by the juvenile justice system, and students experiencing homelessness) to feel more engaged and motivated as readers.

This is because reading motivation, particularly intrinsic reading motivation, is positively and significantly associated with reading development. Research suggests that students with high intrinsic reading motivation view reading as a positive and enriching activity.<sup>26</sup> These students tend to read more often, have stronger comprehension skills, and are more likely to become skilled readers than those with lower intrinsic reading motivation.<sup>27</sup>

Intrinsic motivation is influenced by various factors,<sup>28</sup> including a student's beliefs about reading — i.e., the value they place on reading as an activity, their identity, confidence, interest, and ability as a reader, as well as their perception of the relevance of various texts to their own lives and experiences.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, instruction and curricula that connect with students' identities and interests may ultimately help foster their motivation, engagement, and reading ability. Several<sup>30</sup> studies have shown<sup>31</sup> that implementing culturally relevant texts leads to increased student interest, reading engagement, comprehension, and achievement scores.<sup>32</sup>

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## ***HQIM & Balanced Representation***

High-quality instructional materials are a crucial component of effective reading instruction. Advocates, policymakers, educators, and families must consider what constitutes “high quality” instructional materials. Typically, instructional materials are deemed high quality based on their alignment with state [academic standards](#), [evidence-based](#) practices in the relevant content area, and the professional learning opportunities and implementation supports available to educators. These criteria matter and can have a major impact on students’ academic performance.<sup>33</sup> They can also be a transformative tool to advance equity, especially when paired with strong instructional practices.<sup>34</sup>

However, while these criteria are necessary, they are insufficient on their own. For materials to truly be considered “high quality,” they should also portray diverse identities and interests in engaging and authentic ways that allow students to connect their learning and activate prior knowledge. Unfortunately, instructional materials are seldom both evidence-aligned in reading instruction *and* balanced in their representation of diverse students’ identities. Advocates can use the [Tool for Representational Balance](#) as a starting point to assess how characters, groups, and concepts are depicted in grade school books used in their communities.

EdTrust’s [“Representation in Books”](#) blog series offers first-person perspectives on navigating identity and representation, as well as the lack of representational balance in children’s literature. The series also provides book recommendations that celebrate and authentically represent multiple and intersecting identities.

## ***How Can State Policy Advance This Principle?***

States can take an active role in producing a list of vetted instructional materials and assessments that are high quality not only in their adherence to state standards and evidence-aligned reading instruction, but also in how they connect to students’ varied backgrounds, identities, and interests. This requires considering whether the curricular materials are culturally and linguistically representative and portraying characters, topics, and events in a [fully realized and complex manner](#).<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, too many states are moving in the wrong direction. Political efforts to ban books, censor teaching and stifle student knowledge are [gaining traction across the country](#).<sup>36</sup> These efforts hinder equity by erasing stories from curricula, censoring authentic expressions of diverse identities, and silencing student voices. This not only undermines students’ literacy development but also their ability to understand diverse cultures both in the U.S. and around the world. Advocates can use EdTrust’s [Can’t Be Erased Campaign Toolkit](#) to take action.

## PRINCIPLE 3:

### Provide Equitable, Differentiated Supports

**State policies play an important role in ensuring that schools provide an effective and equitable system of assessments and interventions to support every student in learning to read.**

Strong data is fundamental to a school's ability to provide robust interventions. Without high-quality data, educators, administrators, and families have less insight into students' unique strengths and needs, making it more challenging to provide effective and aligned support.

For example, strong data practices allow educators, families, and administrators to identify students who are behind in their grade-level reading progress and ensure that these students receive evidence-based support. Research consistently demonstrates<sup>37</sup> that [early](#) and targeted reading interventions can significantly improve literacy outcomes for students struggling with their reading development.<sup>38</sup> Educators and families can also identify students with a range of learning differences (e.g., dyslexia) who may benefit from different and/or more intensive support.

With strong data as the foundation, schools can provide a robust system of evidence-based interventions to meet students' needs. Interventions such as one-on-one tutoring and small-group instruction have been shown to be particularly effective in accelerating reading progress, especially when implemented early, tailored to the specific needs of students, and aligned with core, whole-class instruction.<sup>39</sup>

Strong data practices also allow educators to adjust whole-class instruction, form temporary groups for small-group instruction, monitor student progress, and engage students and their families in discussions about reading progress.

Meanwhile, strong data practices enable district and school leaders to strategically allocate resources, such as assigning interventionists and support staff to the schools and students who need them most, as well as offering professional development opportunities to educators. System leaders can also foster an asset-based learning environment that celebrates students' strengths and values the continuous improvement of all students. For families, strong, accessible data can highlight the additional services their children need, allowing them to work with the school to ensure that their children receive these services.

#### *Multilingual Learners*

Students who are multilingual learners have different strengths and needs than monolingual English speakers when learning to read. While there is clear evidence suggesting that the core tenets of the science of reading apply to multilingual learner literacy development,<sup>40</sup> **these students require additional and differentiated supports.**<sup>41</sup> Research indicates that these supports should focus on helping multilingual learners master core content and skills, build academic language, engage in peer-to-peer learning opportunities, and build upon existing home language, knowledge, and cultural assets.<sup>42</sup> Research also highlights the importance of using valid assessments to evaluate multilingual students' progress and identify areas needing continued support, as well as the ways in which targeted small group interventions can help address specific skill gaps among multilingual learners.<sup>43</sup>

This is not to suggest that multilingual students are destined to struggle when learning to read. Quite the opposite: their home languages can — and should be — viewed as assets for second language acquisition and literacy development. Multilingual students are uniquely positioned to draw connections between their home languages and English, enabling them to build cross-linguistic connections and transfer knowledge from one language to another.<sup>44</sup> But as they learn a new language and *simultaneously* learn to read that language, school systems must be equipped to provide unique supports for them. At a minimum, this includes leaders, educators, specialists, and coaches who understand how these students' needs differ and how to tailor instructional approaches accordingly.

### ***Supporting Multilingual Learners in All Instructional Settings***

Research suggests that multilingual students benefit from instruction that builds literacy in both languages. For example, approaches that improve vocabulary in students' first language have been shown to enhance English vocabulary as well.<sup>45</sup> This aligns with a large body of research that suggests that multilingual learners are best supported in their linguistic and academic development when they receive bilingual instruction.<sup>46</sup> However, only about 1 in 6 multilingual learners (16.5%) are in bilingual classrooms nationwide, while the majority of them (84%) [are enrolled in English as a Second Language programs](#).<sup>47</sup> Therefore, state policy must ensure that the additional strengths and needs of these students are met across *all instructional settings*.

One key barrier to enrolling more multilingual learners in bilingual programs is the lack of linguistically diverse teachers.<sup>48</sup> Despite the growing population of multilingual students, the nation's teacher supply has not kept pace. Only about 1 in 8 American teachers speaks a non-English language at home, and not all of them are credentialed to teach in bilingual settings.<sup>49</sup> This shortage of bilingual educators is heavily influenced by the various obstacles that bilingual educators and teachers of color often encounter in their pre-service experiences. Without more high-quality, linguistically diverse educators, access to bilingual classrooms will remain stagnant for this expanding group of students.

### ***Supporting Students With Dialects***

Spoken language plays a fundamental role in how students learn to read, write, and spell. Many students in the U.S. enter school speaking various dialects of English, often shaped by regional, racial, and cultural backgrounds. These dialects are distinct in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and intonation.<sup>50</sup>

To teach reading effectively, educators must recognize and understand students' dialects.<sup>51</sup> This knowledge helps them accurately assess what students know and can do, and adapt instruction and support to meet students' specific needs. High-quality professional development can equip educators to identify dialectal variation and tailor instruction accordingly. The goal is for educators to understand how to bridge home dialects to standard English used in school, affirming students' identities while building their proficiency in standard English so they can thrive as readers.

## Students With Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a well-known language-based learning disability that primarily impacts reading, and people with dyslexia struggle to recognize and blend sounds in words, read fluently, and spell accurately. While dyslexia is a lifelong learning disability that persists into adulthood, early screening and intervention, as well as systematic, evidence-based instruction, can help ensure that students with dyslexia excel in school and beyond.

However, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds often face additional barriers to receiving an accurate diagnosis of dyslexia and accessing the evidence-based support services they need.<sup>52</sup> This may be partly because obtaining an evaluation and qualifying for special education services via public school can be a lengthy and arduous process, while private evaluations are cost-prohibitive for many families. Research also suggests that Black students are often underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed for dyslexia,<sup>53</sup> and Black students and their families experience myriad implicit negative biases that hinder access to high-quality evaluations and special education services for dyslexia.<sup>54</sup>

## Older Students

Older students who struggle to read at grade level may also require additional support to master foundational reading skills. Recent [survey findings](#) show that many older students frequently struggle with these foundational skills; yet, few receive explicit instruction in them beyond grade three.<sup>55</sup> [Research](#) shows that when older students do not meet a “decoding threshold” for grade-level text — which is more complex in both content and grammatical structure — they are more likely to struggle with reading comprehension. Currently, many older students do not show growth in comprehension, even with ongoing direct instruction in language and text comprehension, because they do not receive explicit instructional support to decode more sophisticated text.<sup>56</sup>

This is important because without [effective interventions](#),<sup>57</sup> older students often face mounting barriers to meeting grade-level expectations and are at a heightened risk of [not finishing high school](#).<sup>58</sup> This raises an equity concern because students attending under-resourced schools often lack consistent access to strong, experienced teachers, as well as high-impact interventions and supports in earlier grades. As a result, they are more likely to have unmet needs as older readers.



### *How Can State Policy Advance This Principle?*

State policy can play a crucial role in ensuring that struggling readers, as well as multilingual, dyslexic, and older readers, receive the proper support they need for reading development. While specific interventions will likely vary based on students' strengths and needs, the ways in which state policy can create conditions for these differentiated supports are quite similar: States can incentivize districts to provide evidence-based, curriculum-aligned professional development aimed at supporting struggling, multilingual, dyslexic, and older readers. They can also encourage districts to hire reading specialists and literacy coaches with specific expertise in these areas. What's more, states can incentivize, or even legislate, the development of systems to identify older students who are struggling with basic literacy skills and support districts in creating individualized plans to help these students get on track. States can also invest in assessment instruments specifically designed for older readers and targeted interventions tailored to their unique needs.

States should **not**, however, mandate grade retention for struggling readers. Requiring students to repeat a grade if they fail to meet a specific reading assessment benchmark undermines this principle. These grade retention policies can have harmful academic and social consequences. Research also indicates that these policies are not applied equitably. For instance, in Michigan, Black students and students from low-income backgrounds were more likely to be retained than their white peers in the state's now-revoked third grade retention policy.<sup>59</sup>

Instead of relying on a punitive approach that places the responsibility for improvement solely on students, state leaders should focus their efforts on proactive solutions that ensure that all students receive evidence-based reading instruction, early interventions, and targeted support before they fall significantly behind. Additionally, using statewide assessment results as the sole determinant for high-stakes decisions — as many grade retention policies do — places an undue burden of stress and anxiety on students, families, and educators, as most state summative assessments only afford students one shot at demonstrating their proficiency.

## PRINCIPLE 4: Begin at Birth

**State policy must ensure that children are set up to become strong readers in their earliest years.**

While K-3 represents four critical years in a child's literacy development, literacy skills begin at birth. States must adopt policies that improve access to high-quality early childhood education (ECE) settings and services to support equitable literacy development in a child's earliest years.

Research shows that 85% of brain development occurs by age 3 and 90% by age 5.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, high-quality ECE opportunities — such as preschool and early learning programs with qualified educators who deliver nurturing care, have specialized knowledge and experience, utilize instructional tools and resources, foster inclusive and engaging learning environments, and build authentic relationships with families — lay an important foundation for a child's literacy development.

These settings help children develop language skills and build “emergent literacy skills” (e.g., oral language, phonological awareness, and print awareness, sometimes referred to as “pre-literacy skills”). Research indicates that these skills are important precursors to proficient reading. Children with strong emergent literacy skills are more likely to succeed in their literacy development once formal instruction begins than peers who didn't receive support in developing these skills.<sup>61</sup>

However, significant inequities exist in both access to and the quality of ECE opportunities across the country. Many children, particularly Black and Latino children, lack access to high-quality, state-funded ECE programs. According to an EdTrust [study](#), only 1% and 4% of Black and Latino 3- and 4-year-olds in 26 states are enrolled in high-quality ECE programs. This means that students of color are disproportionately denied the strong start they need and deserve to develop into skilled, engaged readers.<sup>62</sup>

*Children with strong emergent literacy skills are more likely to succeed in their literacy development once formal instruction begins than peers who didn't receive support in developing these skills*

## How Can State Policy Advance This Principle?

States can consider legislating significant long-term investments to stabilize the child-care and early education sector and establish a reliable source of revenue. State-level investments in early childhood systems offer a secure way to finance early childhood services, instead of relying on a [patchwork of federal funding streams](#).<sup>63</sup> While federal programs such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Head Start/Early Head Start, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are essential resources for families, they are chronically underfunded and [vulnerable to federal spending cuts](#).<sup>64</sup>

State-level investments to supplement federal funding are urgently needed, as the [child-care fiscal cliff](#)<sup>65</sup> has exacerbated [existing disparities](#) from a young age. This leaves many families — especially families of color and families with low incomes — without access to affordable, high-quality child care and early childhood education.<sup>66</sup>

In making these investments, states should prioritize expanding access to and the quality of their state-funded preschool programs for underserved students and their families. As a starting point, state officials should collect and publish meaningful equity data to inform decisions on where to expand access, such as identifying neighborhoods with the highest number or percentage of underserved children who are not currently enrolled in a high-quality program. States can also conduct substantial outreach to increase awareness of ECE programs and enrollment procedures.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to measures that stabilize the child-care sector, states can consider ways to bolster social supports that strengthen families with young children, advancing comprehensive strategies that coordinate across public health, education, and human service agencies and initiatives. For example, state leaders can prioritize two specific levers to support emergent literacy skills among children:

1. Expand home visiting programs that connect families with trained professionals who provide guidance on early language development, empowering parents with strategies to support their child's literacy from birth in a nurturing, trusting environment.
2. Support programs that expand access to culturally diverse books and work with families to read with their children. These programs can also connect families to community and library programming and educate them on the importance of reading, emphasizing that reading aloud to young children every day is essential for linguistic development before kindergarten.

These and other strategies are discussed in greater detail in the New York Campaign for Early Literacy's [brief](#).

## PRINCIPLE 5: Empower Educators

**State policy must support educators in becoming experts in teaching reading through evidence-based instruction.**

### *Teacher Preparation and Training*

States must ensure that teacher preparation programs (including alternative certification programs and other nontraditional routes into the classroom) provide K-8 educators with a strong foundation in evidence-based literacy instruction, including an understanding of evidence-based literacy practices, the role of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), the types of differentiated needs and supports for various learners, and how to administer formative assessments and use the resulting data to improve instruction and target supports.

Research suggests that strong teacher training plays a pivotal role in teaching students to become skilled readers. [Improving teacher preparation](#) so that every incoming teacher enters the classroom with a solid background in the science of reading lessens the burden on districts to retrain teachers on the core elements of scientifically based reading instruction.<sup>68</sup> Teacher preparation and training should also provide incoming teachers with information about broader learning development processes — not only the cognitive aspects of learning to read but also how supporting students' [social and emotional development positively impacts their literacy development](#).<sup>69</sup>

### *Educator Supports & Development*

Once in the classroom, educators need significant supports to continue to build their expertise in these competencies. These supports include job-embedded support, ongoing professional learning, sustained help with adopting and implementing [HQIM](#), and strategies for meaningful engagement with parents and families. Such supports can help educators understand the value of evidence-based instructional approaches, gain confidence in their expertise, and feel supported by their peers and school leaders. Many teachers in today's classrooms will need to unlearn the reading instruction methods they were originally taught. This may be an emotional and arduous process for many educators, but it's a necessary one.

Students attending under-resourced schools are more likely to be taught by educators who lack consistent and meaningful additional support. Schools with fewer resources often struggle to fund sustained professional development, instructional coaches, and literacy specialists. Many educators in under-resourced schools may also have larger class sizes to manage and juggle additional professional responsibilities, and school- and district-leaders may be compelled to address urgent, short-term issues instead of championing strategic, large-scale change.

## ***How Can State Policy Advance This Principle?***

States should ensure that every incoming teacher has a solid background in teaching reading by adopting and implementing policies for educator preparation programs (EPPs). They can do this by establishing clear, rigorous standards for EPPs that set expectations for pre-service preparation in evidence-based reading instruction. This preparation should address the needs of all students, including the additional assets and supports for multilingual learners and students with dyslexia, as well as understanding, use, and communication of assessment data. States also have the authority to set educator licensure requirements to ensure that incoming elementary teachers demonstrate this knowledge. States should also provide support in aligning preparation programs with these standards, monitor adherence to this alignment, and take corrective action as needed.

To support teachers already in the classroom, states can provide funding for districts and schools to offer professional learning on evidence-based reading instruction and materials, while establishing clear guardrails to ensure these offerings deepen educator's understanding and use of evidence-based curricular materials, assessments, and supports. Funds can also be used to allocate grant funding for literacy coaches to provide job-embedded support in districts and schools with the highest percentage of students performing below grade level.



## PRINCIPLE 6:

### Authentically Partner With Families

Families and caregivers can best support their child's reading skills when they have an *accurate* understanding of their child's current reading level, strengths, and areas for growth. However, far too few parents report having access to this information. According to an EdTrust [report](#), only half of the parents of young learners indicated that they receive information from their school about whether their child is meeting academic expectations for their grade.

Research suggests that families can [significantly bolster](#) their child's literacy development by actively engaging in their education and collaborating with educators.<sup>70</sup> Strong family engagement at early ages has been [linked to enhanced literacy development](#) — and it is the responsibility of schools to create meaningful opportunities for this collaboration.<sup>71</sup>

When [engaging with families](#) about their child's literacy development, school leaders, educators, and support staff must prioritize authentic communication and partnership, build mutual respect, center shared decision-making, and communicate in culturally responsive and accessible ways.<sup>72</sup> It is also crucial for teachers and staff to understand how to convey both a student's reading strengths and areas for improvement.

#### ***How Can State Policy and Implementation Advance This Principle?***

Many states require schools to notify a student's parent when the student is identified as falling behind grade-level reading expectations through a Pre-K-2 screening assessment or state summative assessment. As part of this policy, state legislation or accompanying guidance should stipulate that families be notified of their child's reading results in their home language, through multiple channels, and in context alongside their child's strengths.

Beyond notification, schools also have a responsibility to authentically partner with families to support students' reading progress. Through policy, states can require schools to offer meetings with students' parents to discuss reading results and co-create individualized reading plans that outline specific strategies, interventions, and goals tailored to each student's needs, as well as ways to support literacy development at home.

State agencies play a crucial role in supporting the implementation of these policies by providing guidance to district and school leaders, ensuring that educators are well equipped to engage families meaningfully about their students' literacy development. This is important because parents put stock in the information coming directly from teachers and are likely to view them as trusted messengers. However, teachers need the skills and tools to navigate conversations about students' reading progress with parents and families.

## Closing

As advocates, we must demand evidence-based, comprehensive, and sustainable changes to support all students' literacy development. These principles aim to provide initial guidance to ensure that students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners receive the high-quality, effective reading instruction they need and deserve as a first step toward equitable literacy development. EdTrust believes that every student has the right to read and to learn to read using rigorous, diverse instructional materials and the most effective instructional practices.

Over the next several years, we are committed to incorporating an equity perspective into this topic by producing additional resources and recommendations. We look forward to collaborating with partners and advocates who are passionate about doing the same.

## Glossary

**Reading** refers to a multifaceted set of linguistic and cognitive processes that enables individuals to decode and comprehend written text accurately and automatically.

**Literacy** refers to a set of interconnected skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) that help individuals extract information and construct meaning across various communication channels.<sup>73</sup>

Throughout this document, the terms “reading” and “literacy” are **not** used interchangeably, as they have different meanings. “Reading” refers to the ability to decode and understand *written* text, while “literacy” refers to a broader set of skills — including reading, writing, speaking, and listening — as well as how people construct meaning from multiple modes of communication.<sup>74</sup> EdTrust believes schools have the responsibility to foster strong **literacy** skills among students, empowering them to understand their world, access information, and communicate effectively. However, strong reading skills are a fundamental component of literacy. Reading is often the specific set of competencies taught and measured in educational settings in early grades. Therefore, this resource uses “reading” to refer to the direct activities taught in school, while “literacy” is primarily used to discuss the broader conceptual goal.

**Word recognition** is the ability to translate a word from print to speech based on knowledge of letter-sound relationships to gain access to the appropriate word meanings. Word recognition includes the alphabetic principle, as well as phonemic awareness skills, phonics knowledge, and decoding skills.<sup>75</sup>

**Alphabetic principle** is the understanding that, in alphabetic languages, the sounds of spoken language are represented by letters in written form.<sup>76</sup>

**Phonemic awareness** refers to the ability to understand how spoken words and syllables are made up of separate units of sound that are blended when words are pronounced. This includes the ability to notice, think about, and manipulate the sounds made by spoken words and syllables, such as isolating the sound ‘b’ as the first sound heard in the word “bike” and as the shared sound in the words “boy,” “bounce,” and “beg.”<sup>77</sup>

**Phonics** refers to the understanding of the set of rules that often govern relationships between the sounds of spoken words and the individual letters or groups of letters that represent those sounds in written words.<sup>78</sup>

**Decoding** is the ability to sound out a word to associate a written word with its spoken form, usually by employing knowledge of the relationships between sounds and the letters or groups of letters that represent them to produce a word.<sup>79</sup>

**Comprehension** is the process of constructing a reasonable and accurate meaning by connecting what has been read to what the reader already knows, and what the reader is thinking about until the text is understood.<sup>80</sup>

**Fluency** refers to the accuracy, automaticity, and ease with which a person reads, including the use of phrasing and emphasis to make the text sound like spoken language.<sup>81</sup>

**Vocabulary** refers to the understanding of the meanings, uses, and pronunciations of words.<sup>82</sup>

**Oral language** refers to the ability to understand spoken communication and to communicate verbally using language.<sup>83</sup>

**Background knowledge** refers to the concepts, experiences, information, and text structures with which a reader is already familiar in a particular text.<sup>84</sup>

**Direct and explicit instruction** is a type of teaching that involves clear and deliberate explanations. In this approach, a teacher clearly defines and teaches a concept, models the learning process, guides students through its application, and arranges for extended guided practice.<sup>85</sup> It is not assumed that students will naturally deduce reading concepts on their own.<sup>86</sup>

**Cumulative and systematic instruction** refers to an organized instructional sequence that begins with the easiest and most basic concepts and elements, progressing methodically to more difficult concepts and elements. Each new step builds on concepts that have been previously learned.<sup>87</sup>

**Self-regulation skills** refer to the ability to manage one's own thoughts and feelings while engaging in specific goal-oriented activities, such as organizing behavior, controlling impulses, and solving problems constructively.<sup>88</sup>

**Reading motivation** refers to having a desire to read, an interest in the material, and expecting value from reading.<sup>89</sup>

**Intrinsic motivation** refers to an individual's drive to engage in reading for internal goal or pleasure, rather than for external rewards, pressures, or consequences.<sup>90</sup>

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