

**Q: *Why do we need a Right to Read Act?***

**A:** Two-thirds of Illinois students cannot read proficiently, which is even more alarming when considering the trends broken down demographically. When students miss out on foundational, evidence-based literacy instruction early on, the consequences last a lifetime. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, students who cannot read by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school; and those non-proficient third graders in low-income families are six times more likely to drop out. The Prison Literacy Project estimates that 60% of inmates are struggling readers.

**Q: *What is the Right to Read Act?***

**A:** The Illinois Right to Read Act aims to correct a fundamental injustice that two-thirds of Illinois' students are not proficient readers by improving pre-service teacher training, supporting evidence-based literacy curriculum, and offering educators and higher education faculty professional development and training in evidence-based literacy instruction:

- Pre-service teachers would demonstrate their knowledge of effective reading instruction by passing a foundations of reading exam before earning their license.
- The State Board of Education (ISBE) would offer support to districts to adopt evidence-based literacy curriculum. This would include generating a list of evidence-aligned curricula for districts' consideration and providing Early Literacy Grants to help pilot districts overhaul their curriculum and support their educators.
- Finally, ISBE would offer support to educators to improve their practice in literacy instruction. This could include development

of a micro-credential, creation of tool to help districts assess professional development opportunities, and development of state-level evidence-based literacy professional development modules available for free to teachers, administrators, and faculty at teacher preparation programs.

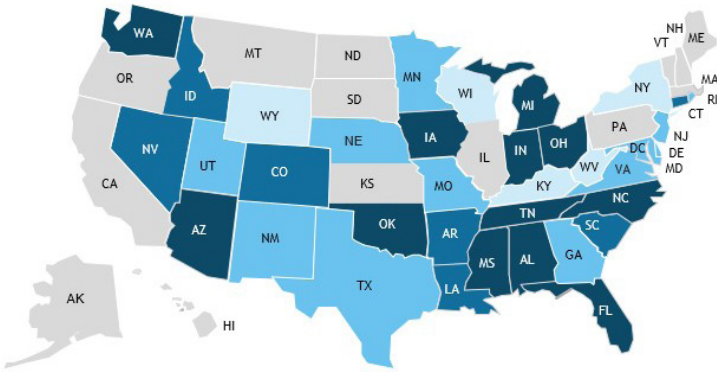
**Q: *How can Illinois improve how we teach reading?***

**A:** Learning to read has been likened to accomplishing a “neurological backflip.” While our brains are hard-wired to learn spoken language, reading is a complex skill that involves – and re-wires – multiple areas of the brain. Children learn to speak simply by being exposed to language, but learning to read and write well requires explicit, systematic instruction.

Too often, literacy programs lack a systematic approach. Evidence-based literacy instruction includes explicit and sequential phonics and phonemic awareness instruction; inclusion of culturally-responsive and rich literature; vocabulary development; and explicit writing instruction, all of which build the skills students need with an ultimate goal of strong reading comprehension. For early elementary students, many programs today rely on a “cueing” system – where students “read” books that have repeated text patterns and picture cues that do not require students to decode words.

For children who are learning English or who speak linguistically diverse dialect, explicit and systematic instruction remains critical, as does evidence-based development of oral language skills. The Right to Read Act would empower teachers with a full toolbox of skills to teach students to accomplish their neurological backflip of learning to read.

**Q: What are other states doing about literacy?**



**A:** Most other states have undertaken significant policy change over the last decade to improve literacy. Some have achieved incredible results, most notably Mississippi, where fourth grade reading scores have climbed ten points since their literacy law was enacted in 2013. This map demonstrates states' alignment with the Foundation for Educational Excellence's model policies for reading improvement; Illinois is among just thirteen states that have not enacted even minimal literacy policies. (Note that in this chart from the Foundation for Educational Excellence, the darker the blue, the more literacy policy elements the state has enacted. However, because student retention is among those policies and most coalition members do not support student retention, we aspire to a medium blue on this chart, rather the darkest, most-aligned blue.)

**Q: Are there any mandates for school districts in the Right to Read Act?**

**A:** No. There is a requirement for the State Board of Education (ISBE) to offer support to districts to adopt evidence-based literacy curricula and professional development, but there is no mandate that districts undertake these changes.

**Q: Why does Illinois need a reading foundations test for pre-service teachers?**

**A:** Thirty-nine states require pre-service elementary teachers to pass a test that fully or partially measures candidates' knowledge of effective, evidence-based literacy components (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and

comprehension), according to the National Council on Teacher Quality. Of those, twenty meet the highest bar by including all five components of reading and requiring a passing score on the literacy assessment without combining it with other subject areas.

Illinois already has comprehensive standards in place for elementary teacher preparation programs; however, recent research of the National Council on Teacher Quality found that many programs are still not providing instruction in all of the foundational reading components. Just under one-third of programs provide instruction in phonemic awareness, a critical early reading skill that enables children to manipulate and isolate sounds within words. Requiring an assessment of these fundamental components of instruction would ensure that programs align with the standards and equip prospective teachers with the full array of tools they will need in their toolbox to help all children learn to read.

**Q: Will the reading foundations test requirement exacerbate Illinois' teacher shortage?**

**A:** Illinois, like the country, has a teacher shortage that is especially profound in central and southern Illinois and within certain licensure categories (though elementary education is not an area of concern for shortages). There are opportunities to improve the educator pipeline across the spectrum of teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention. End-of-program assessments, like content tests and the performance-based assessment that are required under current law, have not been a significant barriers to licensure. Pass rates for these assessments are extremely high; the purpose of these tests is more about accountability for the prep programs to provide evidence-based instruction than for individual accountability for each teacher candidate. (Indeed, Illinois' licensing standards for elementary teacher preparation programs are comprehensive, but evidence suggests that many programs continue teaching outdated reading methods.) Most importantly, we believe that equipping teachers for success through

evidence-based literacy instruction will not only improve outcomes for students, but will also increase teacher satisfaction and retention.

**Q: *Does this bill retain students who cannot read by third grade?***

**A:** No. Some states have included retention as a component of their literacy policies, but most members of the Early Literacy Coalition do not support this and believe getting the right curriculum in place is far more effective than another year of the wrong curriculum.

**Q: *How will this improve outcomes for English Learners?***

**A:** English learners are especially well-served by a structured literacy approach. The National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth issued a 2006 report that found English Learners need instruction in the same five main pillars of literacy that are also important for native English speakers (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension), along with a very strong emphasis in building oral language skills.

The language comprehension elements of literacy are absolutely critical to English learners' literacy success. A structured literacy approach provides explicit instruction in vocabulary development, syntactic skills, and listening comprehension. Tapping into the students' first language can help develop literacy skills in English. Finally, the cumulative and systematic nature of a structured literacy approach recognizes that skills build upon each other; for example, phonemic awareness supports knowledge of sound/letter correspondence which, in turn, makes learning phonics easier so that students efficiently and automatically decode words, and fluent word recognition alongside language comprehension leads to reading comprehension. It must be understood that if word recognition is weak even if language comprehension is well developed, reading comprehension will also be weak. Similarly, if word recognition is strong but language comprehension is weak, that too will result in weak reading comprehension.

Word recognition, which must become increasingly automatic, depends on orthographic mapping—the ability to connect the sounds to the letters and bond the spelling, pronunciation, and meaning in memory. For English learners, in order to develop full orthographic mapping, it is vital to provide explicit instruction in the manner and place of articulation of English phonemes which do not exist in their primary languages. However, given that automatic word recognition also includes bonding the decoded words to their meanings, significant development of oral language and vocabulary is necessary.

**Q: *How will this improve outcomes for students who speak English language variations from standardized English?***

**A:** Students who grow up speaking English language variations, such as African American English (AAE), face unique challenges in literacy learning in a standardized American English (SAE) environment. AAE is guided by its own specific rules for grammar, syntax, and pronunciation. Lack of respect for language variations also presents challenges, as educators may mistake dialectal features as a speech/language concern or, alternatively, may miss red flags that would necessitate further speech/language support by attributing those characteristics to dialect. Understanding phonological, morphological and grammatical/ syntactical features of English language variations will mitigate these challenges and enable more effective reading instruction.

Many factors drive the demographic gaps in academic outcomes, and there is no doubt that poverty, disparities in access to high-quality childcare and pre-school, lack of access to books at home, and lack of culturally and linguistically responsive and inclusive curricula are some of the causes. However, a lack of effective literacy instruction, grounded in the research evidence, is a strong driver of Illinois' deep inequities. By abandoning ineffective and unproven methods and embracing evidence-based instruction, all students can become literate.

**Q: *My kids learned to read just fine under the current approach. Why do we need a change when status quo is working?***

**A:** For the majority of students, the current approach is not working. Stark demographic gaps exist in the data, suggested that opportunities for evidence-based literacy instruction are harder to come by for students with IEPs or from low-income families or families of color. Less than half of white students read at or above grade level, while 15% of Black students, 22% of Latino/a students, and 20% of students who qualify for free- or reduced-price school lunches read at or above proficiency. Overall, about 40% of students will learn to read with any literacy instruction they receive. But for the remaining 60% of students, a structured approach is essential. Structured literacy is absolutely critical for some and harmful to none. Some students will still need remediation to reinforce the skills they learn in their general classroom, but we cannot remediate our way out of a problem that impacts two-thirds of our students.

**Q: *How much does this cost?***

**A:** Members of the coalition have requested a \$5 million ISBE appropriation to fund pilot programs, state-level professional development modules, and staff support to develop an optional micro-credential for educators and/or guidance documents to districts on evidence-based curriculum and professional development. However, even without a state appropriation, the federal COVID relief funds or federal Title funding can be used for literacy improvement and most of the cost is for one-time expenses (early literacy grants to school districts for new curriculum and training for teachers in that curriculum and in effective reading instruction, development of statewide professional development modules, establishment of an optional micro-credential, and creation of guidance documents).

Mississippi, the literacy program of which is perhaps the most comprehensive and well-implemented in the country, allocates \$15 million per year for components of its literacy bill. Sixty-one percent of that funds state-employed literacy coaches who are dispatched to school districts

to support staff with implementation. Another 17% funds professional development for teachers and principals, and fifteen percent funds universal screening and a kindergarten readiness assessment. Other states have enacted literacy changes without a dedicated appropriation.

**Q: *What are the components of reading comprehension?***



**A:** The [Simple View of Reading](#) says that reading comprehension is the product of the words one can recognize and the language one understands. Students need to have explicit, sequential, and systematic instruction to ensure they develop their skills in both of these areas.

“Word recognition” primarily refers to having the phonemic awareness to differentiate the sounds in words and the phonics skills to decode them. When these skills are developed early, they become increasing automatic – like driving a car. Strong readers will effortlessly and instantaneously recognize words, freeing up all of their mental capacity to understanding, analyzing, critiquing, making inferences, connecting text of the page to their background knowledge, and otherwise comprehending the language on the page. “Language comprehension” is also developed early through conversing, reading books to children, and otherwise building their vocabulary and content knowledge through oral language. It is only when that language comprehension is paired with strong decoding ability that children can be proficient readers.

**Q: *Is this just re-hashing the “reading wars” of the nineties?***

**A:** The so-called “reading wars” pitted advocates for a phonics-based approach against supporters of a “whole language” approach. Whole language supporters believed the best way to teach children to read was to immerse them in a literature-rich environment and instill a love of



reading. Phonics advocates supported breaking down words into their component parts, teaching children sound-letter correspondence. The reading wars were settled by the 2000 National Reading Panel, which examined hundreds of research studies about how children learn to read and arrived at the conclusion that effective reading instruction focuses on five pillars: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Thus, neither side “won” the reading wars. Research strongly suggested that explicit, systematic, sequential, and cumulative phonics instruction, *and* early exposure to language, reading aloud, building background knowledge, and developing a complex vocabulary are critical. Many “balanced literacy” programs grew out of these findings; unfortunately, balanced literacy programs often provide an isolated phonics lesson without opportunities to practice those phonics skills in connected text. They might rely heavily on memorization of sight words, rather than teaching phonics patterns for those words that are decodable. And usually such programs will include leveled readers, which teach students to memorize a text pattern and look at the pictures to “read,” rather than requiring them to make meaning out of the text on the page.

**Q: *What is a microcredential?***

**A:** A micro-credential is a smaller, shorter program of study that is specifically focused on one subject area. ISBE would officially attach the designation to the individual’s Professional Educator License or other credential awarded by the agency.

**Q: *Does this include early screening?***

**A:** No. The Right to Read Act just deals with whole-class instructional changes through teacher training and curricular guidance. The bill to require universal screening is HB4202 (Carroll). The bill to require universal screening would complement each other, but are not dependent on each other.

**Q: *What is the Early Literacy Coalition?***

**A:** The Early Literacy Coalition started in the spring of 2021 after several isolated pockets of literacy advocates – mostly parents and educators – discovered that similar groups existed throughout all corners of Illinois, and that they could make a bigger impact for children who are struggling to read by formalizing their network. Visit the Coalition’s website at [ILEarlyLiteracy.org](https://www.ILEarlyLiteracy.org).