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SAN DIEGO UNIFIED · SCHOOL DISTRICT ·

2025

San Diego Unified School District

LINCOLN CLUSTER LITERACY PROGRAM

YEAR 2 INSIGHTS AND SUMMATIVE REPORT

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BACKGROUND

IN recent years, concerns regarding the effectiveness of literacy instruction in the United States have grown significantly, prompting a reevaluation of current educational practices and policies (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2024). This heightened focus stems from a collective effort to improve literacy outcomes for all students, leading to substantial shifts in instructional approaches and pedagogical frameworks (Westall, Kilbride, Utter, and Strunk, 2022). The urgency of these reforms has been further amplified by the educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated existing challenges in literacy acquisition and underscored the need for systemic improvements nationwide. As a result, policymakers, educators, and academic leaders are actively engaged in restructuring literacy instruction, recognizing the fundamental role of early literacy in shaping students' long-term academic success.

IMPORTANCE OF EARLY LITERACY AND 3RD-GRADE READING PROFICIENCY

Reading proficiency by the end of 3rd grade is widely recognized as a critical milestone. Research shows that children who are not reading proficiently by 3rd grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers (Hernandez, 2011). Yet national assessments indicate a persistent literacy challenge: roughly two-thirds of U.S. 4th graders are not proficient in reading, (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). This has prompted policymakers and educators to focus on strengthening early literacy, often through improved support for K–5 teachers. Dozens of states have enacted "science of reading" (SoR) initiatives over the past decade, laws and programs aimed at getting students on track to reading proficiency by 3rd grade (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2023). A common thread in these initiatives is bolstering teacher support in three key areas: professional development, instructional coaching, and instructional resources aligned to evidence-based strategies.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Studies consistently find that high-quality professional development (PD) can improve both teaching and student reading outcomes. For example, one study in California found that 3rd grade students in schools receiving comprehensive early literacy reforms—including professional development aligned with the SoR made significantly greater reading gains than students in similar schools that did not receive the supports (Novicoff & Dee, 2025). Additionally, one review of nine high-quality studies found that teachers who received substantial professional development (averaging 49 hours) improved student reading achievement by an average of 21 percentile points compared to students whose teachers did not receive such training (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007). The most impactful PD tends to be job-embedded, sustained over time, and focused on specific content such as early reading skills (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Additionally, surveys consistently suggest that many teachers feel underprepared to teach reading. In a 2019 national survey, only 11% of early elementary teachers reported feeling "completely prepared" to teach reading after completing their preservice training, while one-third felt at least somewhat unprepared (Education Week Research Center, 2020). Nearly two-thirds of teachers indicated that teacher preparation programs should be strengthened in literacy instruction. When asked where they gained most of their knowledge about how to teach reading, 33% identified professional development as their top source—more than any other pathway. However, access to high-quality, sustained literacy PD remains uneven. For instance, in Michigan, 66.9% of K–3 teachers reported receiving no literacy-specific PD or one-on-one coaching during the 2020–21 school year—a year heavily impacted by COVID-related disruptions—and less than half received such support even as conditions improved in 2021–22 (Westall, Kilbride, Utter, & Strunk, 2022).

Quality and focus of PD are as important as quantity. PD must align with the SoR, covering the five essential components: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Yet only 5% of K–2 teachers said their preservice training was the main source of their literacy knowledge, and many did not learn all five components: just 55% of K–2 teachers could name all five in one assessment (Education Week Research Center, 2020).

As of 2023, 34 U.S. states and the District of Columbia have laws requiring either teacher preparation programs or in-service teachers to complete training in evidence-based reading instruction (Ellis, Holston, Drake, Putman, Swisher, & Peske, 2023). Many states have funded statewide PD initiatives—for example, large-scale rollouts of LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) to retrain teachers in the SoR (Moats, 2023). Early evidence is promising with states that invested in robust teacher PD witnessing reading scores rise. Louisiana, for instance, provided extensive PD and updated curricula and was one of the only states to improve 4th grade reading scores even post-pandemic (Louisiana Department of Education, 2025). Chicago Public Schools saw a jump in reading proficiency after extensive PD tied to a high-quality reading curriculum (Chicago Public Schools, 2023). These examples highlight how sustained, evidence-based professional development, when paired with aligned instructional materials, can lead to measurable improvements in early literacy outcomes.

INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING AND MENTORING IN LITERACY

Instructional coaching has emerged as a powerful complement to traditional PD. Research has documented substantial benefits of coaching in literacy instruction. A meta-analysis of 60 studies found that instructional coaching significantly improves teachers' instructional practice (effect size = 0.49 SD) and leads to meaningful gains in student achievement (effect size = 0.18 SD) (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018). The most effective coaching programs are intensive, sustained, individualized, and context-specific.

Unfortunately, many K–5 teachers do not have regular access to an instructional coach. Coaching availability often depends on state or district initiatives. In the Michigan report, a majority of K–3 teachers reported not having any one-on-one literacy coaching in a given year (Westall, Kilbride, Utter, & Strunk, 2022). However, 26 states now have laws requiring or funding literacy coaches in early elementary grades (Ellis et al., 2023). Between 2013 and 2019, Mississippi implemented a comprehensive literacy reform including statewide literacy coaches, intensive teacher training in the SoR, and the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, which led to the state making the only statistically significant gain on the 2019 NAEP 4th-grade reading assessment, raising its score from 215 to 219 and reaching parity with the national average for the first time (Mississippi First, 2020). Since 2018, Louisiana has implemented a statewide mentor teacher program in which experienced educators receive state-approved training to support novice teachers during their first three years in the classroom. While systemwide student impact data are still emerging, the program is grounded in research demonstrating that high-quality mentoring improves instructional effectiveness and supports student achievement, particularly when paired with comprehensive induction and coaching systems (Louisiana Department of Education, 2025).

INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES AND EVIDENCE-BASED LITERACY STRATEGIES

Many elementary teachers have relied on leveled readers and curricula that encourage students to guess words from pictures or context, strategies that are less effective for developing decoding skills (Shanahan, 2020). In a 2019 survey, 61% of K–2 teachers reported using leveled-reader books as a primary resource, and a majority taught the three-cueing strategy (Education Week Research Center, 2020). Recent reviews by EdReports found that two widely used literacy programs, including Fountas & Pinnell Classroom and Lucy Calkins' Units of Study, do not meet expectations for alignment with college- and career-ready standards, particularly in foundational reading skills, text complexity, and instructional design. Instead, both programs rely on approaches such as cueing systems and lack the systematic, explicit instruction recommended by research-based practices (EdReports, 2021a; EdReports, 2021b). As a result, states have started adopting high-quality instructional materials in literacy. For example, Maryland provided competitive funding incentives through the Maryland Leads Grant Program to support districts in adopting evidence-based reading curricula and training educators in the SoR, aligning with state priorities under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future (Maryland State Department of Education, 2022). As of 2023, 32 states and D.C. have passed laws mandating evidence-based literacy instruction (Ellis et al., 2023).

Access to high-quality books and literacy materials is a foundational component of effective reading instruction, yet significant disparities persist in high-poverty schools. Students in low-income communities are far less likely to have access to books at home, in their classrooms, or in their school libraries—conditions that have been consistently linked to lower literacy achievement (Scholastic, 2018). Classroom libraries, especially those rich in decodable texts, are particularly important for early readers, yet teachers in underserved schools often report insufficient resources to meet student needs (Reading Rockets, 2022). Research has shown that decodable books play a critical role in helping students practice phonics-based decoding strategies, building fluency and confidence (School Library Journal, 2024). In response, several national initiatives have sought to close these gaps. For example, First Book has demonstrated that providing diverse, high-interest books to classroom libraries improves student engagement and academic outcomes (2023). Similarly, Commit Partnership launched a Decodable Literacy Hub to provide families and educators with accessible materials aligned with the SoR (2023). Together, these findings reinforce the need for systemic investment in classroom resources to ensure all students, particularly those in high-poverty schools, have equitable access to the materials necessary to become proficient readers.

Building on this review and earlier evaluation efforts, the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) has raised important questions about whether teachers are receiving the comprehensive support needed to effectively advance literacy development in their classrooms. Emerging concerns include:

- Are professional development opportunities sufficiently deep, sustained, and connected to daily instruction?

- Do teachers have consistent access to targeted, classroom-embedded coaching?

- Are there strong systems in place such as family engagement strategies and support for reading at home that reinforce classroom instruction?

In response, SDUSD has undertaken an evaluation of literacy practices within the Lincoln cluster, focusing, specifically on the DEEP model. This model was designed to enhance the district's standard "business as usual" approach by providing a coordinated package of professional development, coaching, instructional materials, facilitation, and implementation support.

THE DIAMOND EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE PARTNERSHIP (DEEP): BUILDING LITERACY CAPACITY IN UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES

OVERVIEW OF DEEP'S THEORY OF ACTION

The Diamond Educational Excellence Partnership (DEEP) is a community-based initiative focused on improving academic outcomes for students in San Diego's historically underserved Diamond community. Grounded in the belief that early, targeted, and sustained academic and socio-emotional support can significantly enhance student achievement, DEEP employs a comprehensive Theory of Action encompassing four pillars:

1. Early Literacy Development. DEEP promotes evidence-based literacy instruction aligned with the SoR to ensure students reach or exceed grade-level reading proficiency by 3rd grade, a milestone strongly associated with long-term academic success (National Institute for Literacy, 2008).

2. High-Quality Teaching and Professional Development. In partnership with the California Reading and Literature Project (CRLP) and the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD), DEEP provides sustained, job-embedded professional learning and coaching aligned with research-based literacy practices (Moats, 2023).

3. Family and Community Engagement. DEEP empowers caregivers through literacy workshops, at-home reading programs, and other outreach efforts that position families as active partners in students' learning, aligning with research that shows sustained family engagement improves academic outcomes (Epstein, 2011).

4. Comprehensive Student Supports. Recognizing that academic achievement is closely tied to student wellbeing, DEEP integrates wraparound support, including social-emotional learning (SEL), mental health resources, and enrichment opportunities—reflecting research that links these services to improved academic and developmental outcomes (Osher, Kidron, Brackett, Dymnicki, Jones, & Weissberg, 2016).

IMPLEMENTATION IN SAN DIEGO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (SDUSD)

DEEP currently partners with four elementary schools in SDUSD including Chollas Mead, Johnson, Webster, and Encanto who serve predominantly low-income and multilingual learners. These schools have integrated DEEP's multi-pronged support model, which includes:

- Embedding literacy coaches within classrooms for real-time instructional support

- Developing customized schoolwide literacy action plans

- Supporting professional learning communities (PLCs) among educators

- Supplementing Benchmark Advance curriculum with the SIPPS phonics-based literacy program

- Facilitating monthly walkthroughs with DEEP leaders, principals, and CRLP coaches to guide implementation

The ultimate goal of DEEP's approach is to close opportunity gaps and promote long-term academic achievement through improved literacy outcomes.

SUMMARY OF THE FIRST INTERIM EVALUATION REPORT ON DEEP

In 2023–24, the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) launched a multi-year evaluation of DEEP's literacy work in the Lincoln Cluster of SDUSD. The evaluation focused on implementation and early impacts of literacy interventions across DEEP and non-DEEP schools, with particular attention to outcomes for English learners (ELs). Findings from the first interim report highlight both promising trends and persistent challenges.

KEY FINDINGS

- More Effective Implementation in DEEP Schools: DEEP schools offered a more systematic, phonics-focused literacy model (via SIPPS) and demonstrated stronger alignment with SoR-aligned practices. Teachers in DEEP schools reported higher satisfaction with PD, more frequent access to coaching, and more structured peer collaboration compared to non-DEEP schools.

- Positive Impacts on English Learners: While overall differences between DEEP and non-DEEP schools were modest, multilevel analysis revealed that EL students in DEEP schools performed significantly better than their non-DEEP peers, gaining an average of nine additional points on the aReading assessment, equivalent to nearly one full year of literacy growth.

- Instructional Strengths in DEEP Classrooms: Classroom observations using the CLASS framework showed that DEEP teachers provided significantly higher levels of instructional support, especially in cognitive and language development domains.

- Beating the Odds (BTO) Analysis: Chollas-Mead Elementary, a DEEP partner, outperformed 86% of schools in the county on standardized reading tests demonstrating the highest relative gains among high-poverty schools. Other DEEP schools showed variable results, with some performing at or below expectations.

BRIGHT SPOTS

- High-Quality Professional Learning: Teachers cited SIPPS and CRLP as critical to their success, noting the value of structured phonics instruction and coaching support.

- Collaborative Support Systems: Regular access to literacy coaches and grade-level PLCs helped teachers refine practices and respond to student needs.

- Data-Informed Practice: Teachers in DEEP schools leveraged assessment data to provide differentiated instruction and monitor progress, a practice closely aligned with the SoR emphasis on precision teaching.
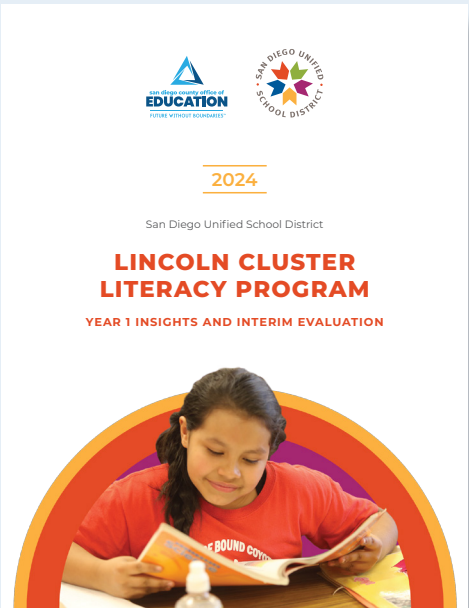
CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

- Inconsistent Curriculum Implementation: Across the cluster, many teachers relied on a patchwork of instructional materials. Even within DEEP schools, variability existed in the use of Benchmark Advance and SIPPS, leading to inconsistent student experiences.

- Limited Access to Resources: Teachers in both DEEP and non-DEEP schools reported lacking essential materials (e.g., decodable texts), and those in non-DEEP schools had fewer opportunities for embedded PD and coaching support.

- Need for Targeted PD: Professional development was often infrequent and inadequately focused on diverse learner needs, particularly those of students with disabilities and ELs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report recommended the following actions to strengthen literacy capacity districtwide:

1. Formalize Curriculum and Implementation: Develop a cohesive literacy framework integrating SIPPS and CRLP and offer comprehensive training and materials to all teachers.

2. Enhance Professional Development and Coaching: Expand access to ongoing, evidence-based PD and structured peer coaching across all schools.

3. Strengthen Data Use: Support teachers in using literacy assessments to drive instruction through training in data analysis and regular data reviews.

The first-year evaluation of DEEP's literacy model demonstrates meaningful progress in building teacher capacity and improving literacy outcomes, particularly for English learners. While implementation challenges persist, the findings suggest that sustained investment in structured, phonics-based instruction, professional learning, and collaborative supports can advance educational equity and excellence across SDUSD.

2024

San Diego Unified School District

LINCOLN CLUSTER LITERACY PROGRAM

YEAR 1 INSIGHTS AND INTERIM EVALUATION

YEAR 2 REPORT

Building on the first year of research, this second and final evaluation report extends our analysis of literacy instruction in the Diamond Community of San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD), with a specific focus on grades 2 through 5. Conducted in partnership with SDCOE, this study explores the long-term implementation and outcomes of two distinct literacy support models across ten elementary schools in the Lincoln cluster—one enhanced by DEEP, and the other reflecting the district's standard literacy approach.

The DEEP model integrates a structured phonics-based curriculum (SIPPS), robust professional development, embedded coaching, and a system of continuous instructional support. In contrast, the Business as Usual (BAU) model relies on Benchmark Advance and standard district-level supports, with more variable access to training and coaching. This setting provides a unique opportunity to examine how differences in training, curriculum, and coaching affect instructional practice and student outcomes in literacy.

While the first interim report focused primarily on early literacy development (K–3), this report expands the scope to include upper elementary grades and a deeper examination of reading comprehension, instructional consistency, and sustained student growth. We also explore the extent to which each model supports English learners and other priority student groups.

This report presents findings from classroom observations, teacher and leader interviews, student achievement data, and implementation reviews. It highlights both promising practices and ongoing challenges, while offering targeted recommendations for improving literacy instruction and advancing educational equity. As SDUSD seeks to scale effective practices districtwide, this final report offers critical insights into how structured literacy support systems like DEEP can help transform reading instruction and outcomes for all students.

PARTICIPANTS

The evaluation involved two cohorts of teachers drawn from schools within the district. Both groups were comparable in terms of teaching experience, subject focus, and student demographics, although some variation in school resources was noted. Students across both models were demographically similar, ensuring that differences in literacy outcomes could be more confidently attributed to the instructional support rather than external factors.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The central questions guiding this evaluation were:

1. What do DEEP and non-DEEP sites provide in terms of professional development, extended learning opportunities for students, and parent support?

2. How does professional development in DEEP and Non-DEEP sites influence teacher knowledge and practice?

3. What is the impact of the DEEP model on student literacy development and achievement compared to the Business as Usual approach?

DATA COLLECTION

The evaluation employed a mixed methods approach to examine literacy instruction in grades 2 through 5. Data collection included four key components designed to provide both breadth and depth of understanding. First, a teacher survey was administered to assess educators' self-reported knowledge of literacy strategies, with a particular focus on foundational reading skills and comprehension practices. These survey responses offered a window into how confident teachers felt in their understanding and application of evidence-based instructional methods.

To complement the survey data, classroom observations were conducted using structured observation protocols. These observations captured both the frequency and quality of literacy-supportive instructional practices. Observers documented the use of phonics, vocabulary development, fluency strategies, and comprehension scaffolds, allowing for direct comparison between schools implementing the DEEP model and those following the district's standard approach.

Student performance data served as a third critical source of evidence. Standardized literacy assessments, including locally administered aReading scores and state testing data, were analyzed to measure reading achievement and overall literacy development across participating schools. This quantitative data helped assess the extent to which different instructional approaches influenced student outcomes over time.

Finally, in-depth interviews with teachers, parents, and instructional leaders provided rich contextual insights. These conversations helped to triangulate findings from the survey, observations, and student data by capturing educators' experiences, perceptions of instructional shifts, and reflections on the supports and challenges associated with implementing literacy strategies.

The evaluation focused on three interrelated outcomes. The first was teacher knowledge, examining changes in educators' understanding and reported use of literacy strategies. The second outcome centered on teacher practice, tracking observable shifts in classroom instruction, particularly in

the use of structured, evidence-based approaches aligned with the SoR. The third and most critical outcome was student literacy development, as measured by gains in reading proficiency and achievement. Together, these data sources and outcomes formed a comprehensive picture of how literacy reform efforts shaped instruction and impacted student learning across the Lincoln cluster.

YEAR 2 RESULTS

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, COACHING, AND RESOURCE ACCESS ACROSS DEEP AND NON-DEEP SCHOOLS

This section examines the professional development, coaching, and instructional resources provided to teachers in the Lincoln cluster, with a focus on identifying differences between DEEP and non-DEEP sites. To answer our evaluation questions, we synthesized data from teacher surveys, teacher interviews, classroom observations, and parent interviews, and examined differences in resource offerings such as DEEP's Super Tuesday/Thursday programming and the district's PrimeTime extended learning initiative.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: GREATER DEPTH AND CONSISTENCY IN DEEP SCHOOLS

Survey results showed that teachers across the Lincoln cluster have participated in a variety of professional development (PD) opportunities related to literacy. However, notable differences emerged in the intensity and type of PD accessed by DEEP versus non-DEEP educators. Nearly two-thirds of DEEP teachers (64%) reported receiving at least 50 hours of literacy-related PD in the past 18 months, compared to only 41% of non-DEEP teachers. This disparity suggests a more sustained and immersive approach to professional learning within DEEP schools.

PD offerings also differed in content. DEEP teachers were more likely to engage in evidence-based, SoR-aligned trainings such as SIPPS, the California Reading and Literature Project (CRLP), and Results for Reading Comprehension, as well as workshops on Spanish-English biliteracy transfer and dyslexia guidelines. These experiences were often delivered in-person and embedded within school routines. In contrast, non-DEEP teachers reported greater participation in curriculum-specific training (e.g., Benchmark Advance) and district-provided webinars—many of which lacked consistent follow-up or classroom application.

The perceived impact of PD also varied across groups. DEEP teachers were more likely to describe PD as impactful. About 48% reported that PD influenced their teaching "a great deal" or "a lot," while only 23.3% of non-DEEP teachers reported similar levels of impact. Teachers at non-DEEP schools were more likely to describe PD as having only "a moderate amount" (39.5%) or "a little" (32.6%) impact. These differences point to the value of sustained, classroom-connected professional learning in shaping instruction.

Teachers' Perceptions of PD Impact
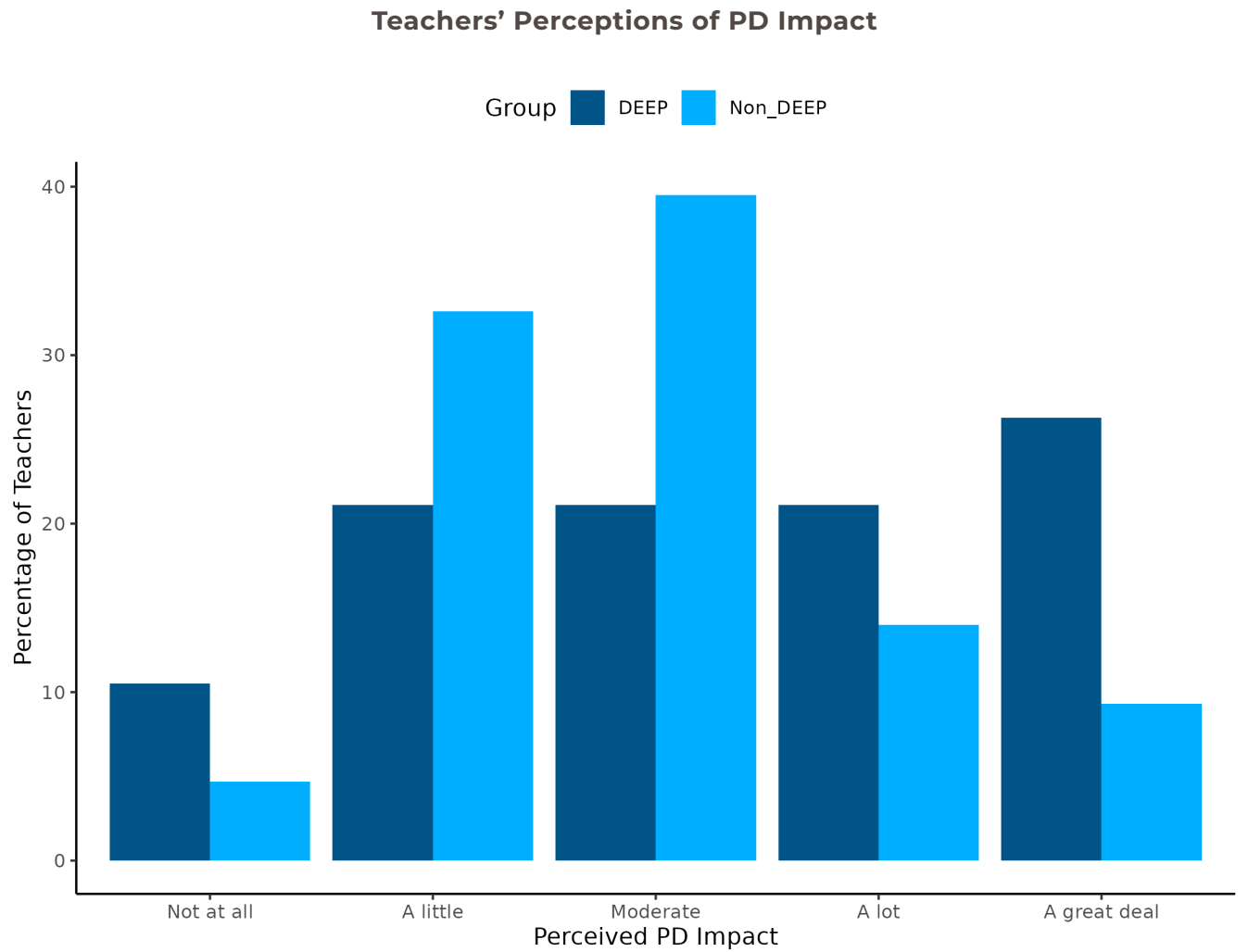
These patterns were echoed in teacher interviews also. Educators at DEEP sites described receiving PD that was relevant, practical, and immediately applicable. They credited SIPPS and CRLP training with improving their instructional routines, especially in phonics and comprehension. Non-DEEP teachers, by contrast, described PD as inconsistent, generic, or overly theoretical. Several voiced frustration at the lack of coaching or follow-up. One non-DEEP teacher remarked, "PD has been sporadic and not sufficiently tailored to our needs."

COACHING: EMBEDDED AND RESPONSIVE IN DEEP SCHOOLS

Access to instructional coaching further differentiated DEEP from non-DEEP schools. DEEP teachers consistently reported the presence of site-based literacy coaches who modeled lessons, facilitated team planning, conducted walkthroughs, and delivered individualized feedback. These coaches were seen not just as technical support, but as trusted partners in improving instructional practice. One DEEP teacher noted,

> *"The literacy coach pushes in as needed, meets with kids, walks through classrooms, and checks the data to help us target support."*

By contrast, non-DEEP teachers were far less likely to report access to embedded coaching. Those who had some support described it as limited in frequency, not literacy-specific, or focused more on compliance than pedagogy. Teacher interviews revealed that many non-DEEP educators felt professionally isolated, especially in addressing the needs of struggling readers and English learners. "There's just no one to check in with about how it's going," one teacher explained. "We're figuring it out alone."

RESOURCE ACCESS: MORE STRUCTURED, ALIGNED, AND SUPPLEMENTAL IN DEEP SITES

While all schools in the Lincoln cluster utilize Benchmark Advance as their core literacy curriculum, teachers across both DEEP and non-DEEP schools reported heavy reliance on supplemental materials. These included Heggerty, i-Ready, and teacher-created resources like those from Teachers Pay Teachers. However, DEEP schools had access to a more coherent suite of aligned resources, notably SIPPS and CRLP, which were implemented consistently and supported by professional learning.

Teacher survey data showed that DEEP educators were more likely to use standardized screeners and diagnostic assessments (50% vs. 37.3%) and more likely to emphasize alignment to standards when selecting texts (67% vs. 51%). Classroom observations confirmed that DEEP teachers more consistently integrated structured phonics routines and small-group instruction, suggesting a stronger implementation of SoR-aligned practices.

Teachers at non-DEEP schools described curriculum variability as a major challenge. Interviewees noted inconsistent use of Benchmark components across grade levels and schools, as well as a lack of accessible resources for students with disabilities or those below grade level. One teacher commented, "Benchmark is beautiful, but our students can't access it. It doesn't meet them where they are." These gaps in curriculum coherence and accessibility underscore the need for clearer guidance, targeted support, and more inclusive materials to ensure all students can meaningfully engage with grade-level content.

EXTENDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES: DEEP'S SUPER TUESDAY/ THURSDAY VS. PRIMETIME

Beyond core instruction, DEEP and non-DEEP students experienced different levels of access to structured, literacy-focused extended learning. DEEP schools offered "Super Tuesday/Thursday" programs on early-dismissal days, which combined targeted reading instruction with STEAM enrichment. These sessions were intentionally aligned with classroom goals and led by trained staff. Parents of students in DEEP schools described these offerings as highly engaging and supportive of literacy growth. One parent observed that her child was "more comfortable reading aloud" and had shown noticeable gains in fluency and vocabulary since participating in the program.

In contrast, all Lincoln cluster schools had access to SDUSD's "PrimeTime" program, which provides before- and after-school care, tutoring, and a wide range of enrichment activities (e.g., arts, athletics, SEL). While PrimeTime serves an important role in supporting working families and offering general academic reinforcement, it is not specifically designed to deliver systematic literacy instruction. As such, the structured, targeted supports offered by DEEP's extended learning programs represent a meaningful enhancement for students at partner sites.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SUPPORTS: DEEP OFFERS A STRONGER LITERACY ECOSYSTEM

Interviews with DEEP parents highlighted another layer of differentiated support. Families reported increased access to books, stronger home-school literacy connections, and positive changes in reading routines. Parents described how book distribution, reading incentives, and parent engagement events helped normalize daily reading habits. "We made it a habit of reading before bed every night," one parent explained. Others cited noticeable gains in their child's writing, decoding, and reading confidence.

In contrast, parent support structures at non-DEEP schools were less visible. While families participating in PrimeTime appreciated the enrichment and supervision, they did not report the same level of direct literacy support or communication about their child's reading development. Several DEEP parents did express a desire for more feedback and communication from program staff, especially regarding their children's individual needs, but overall, they viewed the program as impactful and empowering.

Taken together, the data clearly indicate that DEEP schools provide a more robust, structured, and coherent set of professional development, coaching, and instructional resources than their non-DEEP counterparts. These differences are evident across multiple dimensions including PD dosage and quality, access to embedded coaching, alignment of instructional materials, availability of targeted extended learning, and engagement of families. While foundational literacy practices are broadly shared across the cluster, the intensity and coherence of support within DEEP schools appear to enable more consistent and research-aligned implementation.

These findings suggest that expanding access to DEEP-like supports, particularly embedded coaching, sustained professional learning, and structured extended-day literacy programming could help address implementation variability and support stronger student outcomes across the district.

INFLUENCE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON TEACHER KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE IN DEEP AND NON-DEEP SCHOOLS

This section explores how professional development in both DEEP and non-DEEP schools impacts teachers' knowledge of literacy instruction and their classroom practices. Findings are drawn from multiple data sources, including teacher surveys, classroom observations (CLASS), and teacher interviews. Together, these data provide a multi-dimensional view of how professional learning opportunities shape teachers' understanding of literacy strategies, their implementation of research-based practices, and the instructional climate of classrooms across the Lincoln cluster.

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT INTENSITY AND DESIGN

Building on earlier findings about differences in PD access and structure, this section explores how those professional development experiences shaped teacher knowledge and classroom practice. Survey and interview data suggest that not only did DEEP teachers receive more hours of PD, but the training was more embedded, aligned with Science-of-Reading practices, and reinforced through ongoing coaching. These supports appear to have strengthened teachers' understanding of literacy development and increased their confidence in implementing research-based strategies.

REPORTED SHIFTS IN KNOWLEDGE AND STRATEGY USE

Teacher interviews further underscored how PD in DEEP schools cultivated deeper instructional knowledge, particularly around foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, and guided comprehension. DEEP teachers commonly referenced the SIPPS program, structured small-group routines, and tools for diagnostic assessment as direct applications of their learning. As one DEEP teacher put it, "We use what we learned through CRLP to plan the whole lesson—from text analysis to vocabulary routines to targeted questioning." Teachers also described shifts in how they selected texts, with DEEP teachers more likely to prioritize alignment to standards and relevance to instruction.

In contrast, many non-DEEP teachers reported drawing from a wider array of ad hoc resources, often outside the Benchmark curriculum. Several voiced uncertainty about how to differentiate instruction for diverse learners and expressed a desire for more structured, classroom-embedded professional development. One non-DEEP educator explained, "I pull from so many places. I need something that actually teaches them to read." Another stated, "PD has been inconsistent. We need follow-up and people observing our lessons—not just slides."

Survey data aligned with these qualitative insights. DEEP teachers were more likely to use standardized assessments to diagnose phonemic awareness (50% vs. 37%) and to engage in skill-based small-group instruction. They were also more likely to emphasize direct instruction strategies for decoding and fluency. Conversely, non-DEEP teachers reported more frequent use of technology tools, graphic organizers, and student-centered reading culture strategies such as peer discussion, rotating themes, and independent book selection.

**Use of Key Literacy Strategies by Program**
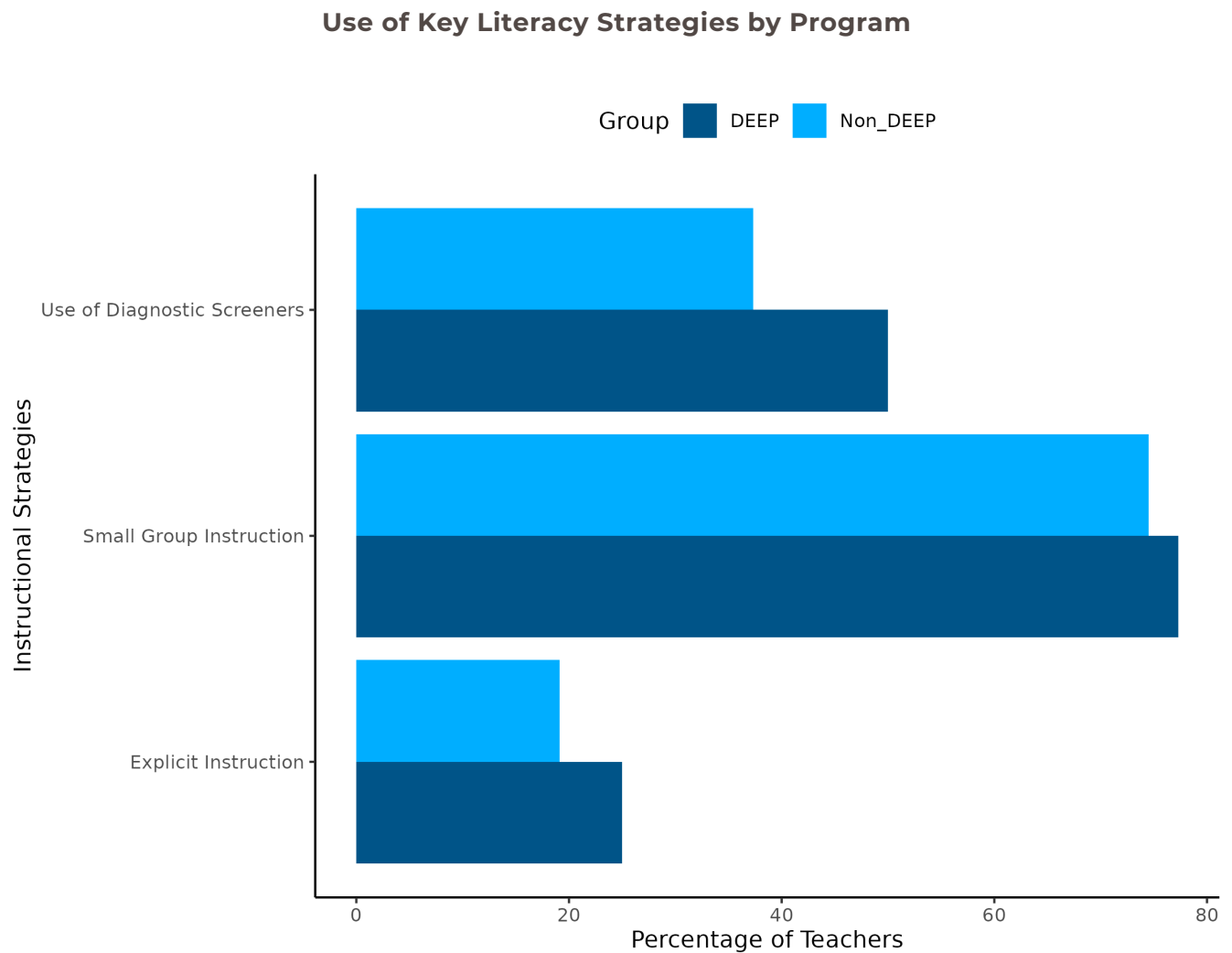
These trends suggest that while both groups draw from a shared toolkit of literacy strategies, DEEP teachers implement them within a more coherent instructional framework, likely shaped by the structure and depth of their PD experiences.

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION FINDINGS: CONSISTENCY IN CLIMATE, MIXED PATTERNS IN INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

To supplement self-reported data, evaluators observed 68 literacy classrooms in grades 3–5 using the CLASS framework. This provided an objective measure of instructional climate and the application of teaching strategies during literacy instruction.

Classroom Organization and Emotional Support scores were strong across both DEEP and non-DEEP schools. DEEP classrooms had a slightly higher average in Classroom Organization (5.37 vs. 4.88) and similar ratings for Emotional Support (5.00 vs. 4.94), indicating well-managed, emotionally supportive environments regardless of PD model. These findings suggest that foundational classroom management and rapport-building skills are widespread across the cluster.

Class Scores by Domain and Program
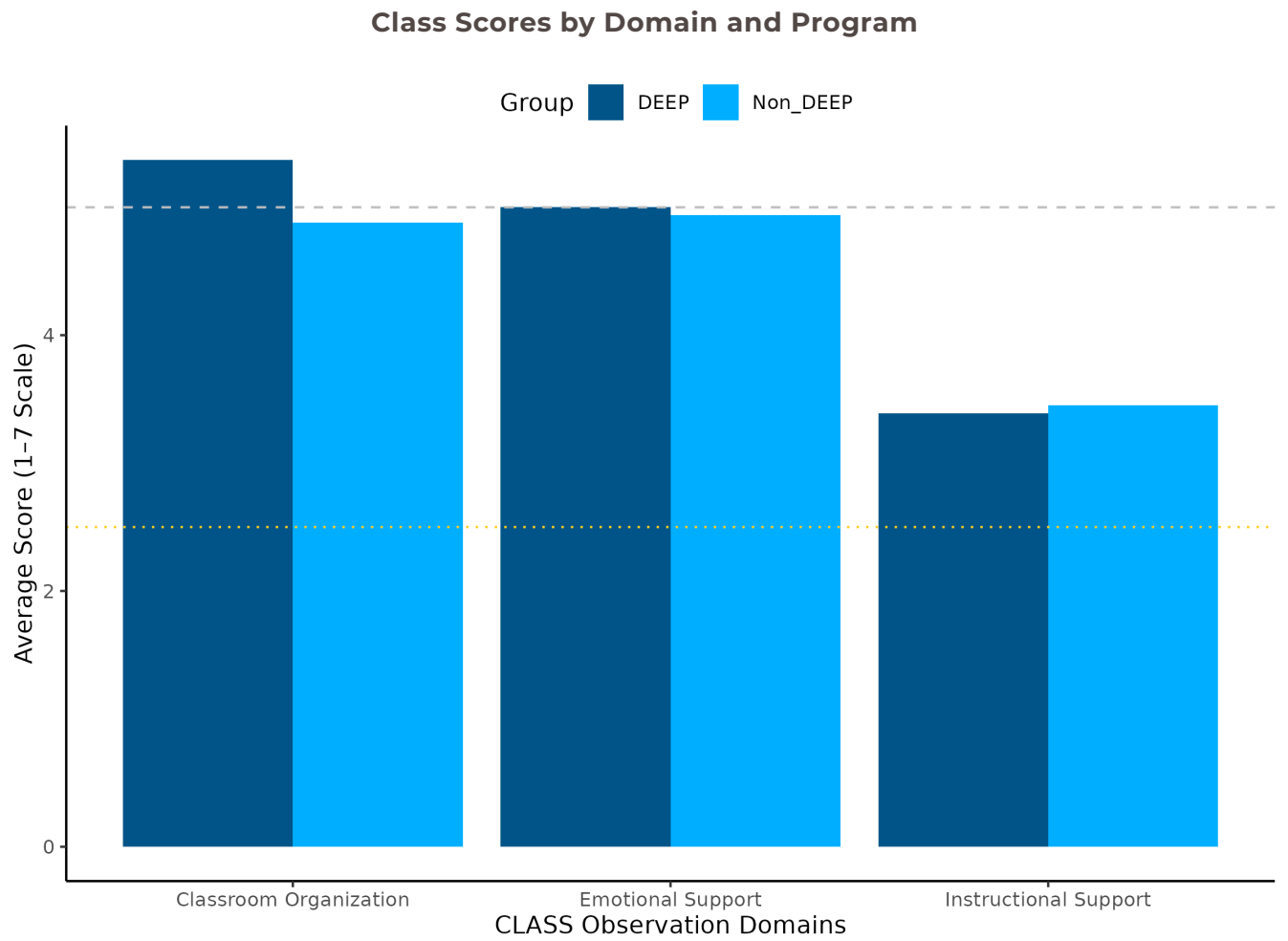
Instructional Support, the CLASS domain most directly tied to teaching and learning, revealed a more complex picture. Both DEEP and non-DEEP classrooms scored slightly above the "exceptional" threshold (3.39 and 3.45, respectively), with no statistically significant difference between them.

These results suggest that teachers across the Lincoln cluster consistently incorporate elements such as purposeful questioning, concept development, and feedback to support student thinking and language growth. However, the relatively modest scores also indicate that there is substantial opportunity to deepen the rigor and alignment of instruction with evidence-based literacy practices. Insights from teacher interviews reinforced this interpretation. While educators described using a variety of instructional strategies, such as phonics routines, guided writing, and small group instruction, many also cited challenges that limited their effectiveness, including pacing demands, inconsistent materials, and gaps in training. Across both DEEP and non-DEEP sites, teachers expressed a strong desire for additional support in differentiating instruction for English learners and students with disabilities.

SYNTHESIS OF IMPACT: PD SHAPES PRACTICE, BUT IMPLEMENTATION IS UNEVEN

Triangulating across sources, the data suggests that professional development in DEEP schools is more likely to lead to observable improvements in teacher knowledge and instructional consistency. DEEP teachers reported stronger impacts, used more structured assessment tools, and implemented phonics and comprehension routines more consistently. They also had access to a coherent suite of PD resources and coaching aligned with the SoR. This alignment appeared to reinforce instructional coherence and confidence.

In non-DEEP schools, teacher knowledge and practice were more variable. While many non-DEEP teachers showed creativity in adapting materials and strategies, they lacked the consistent scaffolding and support systems that enable deeper implementation. Without structured follow-up, many described "figuring it out" independently or relying on informal collaboration with colleagues. These teachers also expressed uncertainty about how to differentiate instruction effectively, particularly for high-need learners.

Observation data confirmed that teachers in both DEEP and non-DEEP schools create positive, well-managed classrooms. However, translating PD into deeper instructional support for literacy requires sustained investment, targeted coaching, and curriculum alignment. The fact that Instructional Support scores hovered just above the exceptional threshold—even in DEEP schools—suggests that while PD is making a difference, more can be done to translate knowledge into rigorous, high-impact instruction across all sites.

Professional development in DEEP schools exerts a stronger influence on teacher knowledge and classroom practice than in non-DEEP schools. DEEP teachers report more intensive and relevant training, greater confidence in instructional strategies, and stronger alignment between PD and classroom application. They are more likely to implement systematic routines aligned with the SoR and to use formative data to guide instruction.

By contrast, non-DEEP teachers face more fragmented PD experiences and fewer embedded supports, resulting in more variation in instructional quality and coherence. While many demonstrate deep commitment and innovation, they report a greater need for coaching, differentiated training, and structured materials.

Observation data validate that both groups provide emotionally supportive, well-organized classrooms, but that improving the quality of instructional support, particularly around literacy-specific strategies, remains a districtwide growth area.

These findings suggest that professional development, when sustained, evidence-based, and embedded within a supportive coaching structure, has the power to deepen teacher knowledge and transform practice. Expanding access to such PD across the Lincoln cluster should be a priority for scaling effective literacy instruction districtwide.

IMPACT OF THE LITERACY MODELS ON STUDENT LITERACY OUTCOMES

This section explores the impact of the literacy models in both DEEP and non-DEEP schools on student reading outcomes. To investigate this, we conducted a quasi-experimental analysis of student achievement using FastBridge aReading data, complemented by insights from teacher surveys, classroom observations, and educator interviews to provide a fuller picture of instructional context and implementation. Together, these data offer a comprehensive picture of how each literacy model is contributing to student growth in reading.

SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION DESIGN

We examined the reading progress of students in grades 2 through 5 across 10 elementary schools in the Lincoln cluster. Four of these schools implemented the DEEP literacy model, which integrates the SIPPS phonics program, structured professional development through the California Reading and Literature Project (CRLP), and embedded coaching. The remaining six schools followed the district's standard literacy model, relying primarily on Benchmark Advance and site-selected supplemental materials.

To ensure a fair comparison, we applied propensity score matching (PSM) to create equivalent groups across key demographic and academic variables. We then fit a multilevel regression model to predict students' spring aReading scores, accounting for both fixed effects (e.g., student characteristics, instructional model) and random effects (e.g., school context).

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE MULTILEVEL MODEL

Our primary outcome measure was the spring aReading score. The model included variables for program type (DEEP or not), student demographics (e.g., race, gender, low-income status, EL status, special education), and school effects. The results of our analysis are shown in the following graph and summarized below.

Program and Group Effects on Reading Scores
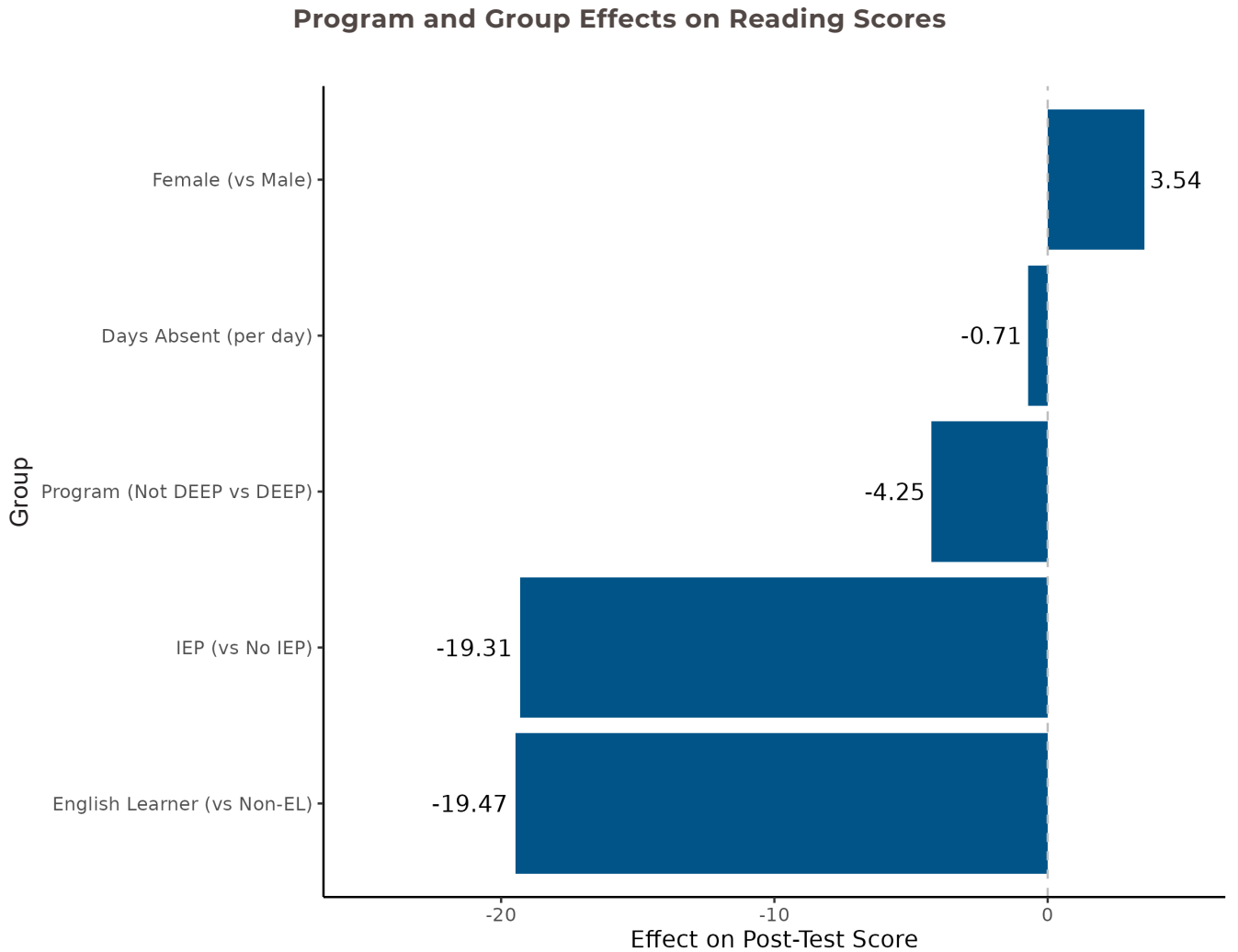
Our results suggest there was no significant program effect. On average, students in DEEP schools scored 4.25 points higher than those in non-DEEP schools. However, this difference was not statistically significant (p = 0.27), suggesting that the DEEP literacy model, implemented during this study period, did not produce a measurable advantage in overall reading scores for the general student population.

In contrast to this finding, we did uncover significant impacts for different groups of students. For example,

- English learners (ELs) scored significantly lower than non-ELs by an average of 19.47 points (p < .001), regardless of program. This result underscores the persistent literacy gap facing multilingual learners.

- Students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) also scored significantly lower by approximately 19.31 points (p < .001), highlighting ongoing challenges in serving students with disabilities.

- Absenteeism had a consistent negative impact. Each additional day of absence reduced student scores by 0.71 points (p < .001), translating to an average 12-point loss for students missing 17 days—approximately the district's threshold for chronic absenteeism.

- Female students performed significantly better than male students by 3.54 points on average (p = .02).

- Only 1% of the variance in scores could be attributed to school-level differences (ICC = 0.01), indicating that most differences in reading outcomes were explained by individual student factors rather than broader school conditions.

SUPPLEMENTARY INSIGHTS: CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION AND TEACHER PERCEPTIONS

Although student-level outcomes did not reveal a statistically significant overall program effect, findings from classroom observations and teacher surveys point to more nuanced differences in instructional practices and support structures between DEEP and non-DEEP schools. Observations conducted using the CLASS tool showed that both DEEP and non-DEEP classrooms were similarly rated in key domains: Emotional Support (DEEP = 5.00; Non-DEEP = 4.94), Classroom Organization (5.37 vs. 4.88), and Instructional Support (3.39 vs. 3.45). These results indicate that classrooms across the cluster are generally well-managed and emotionally supportive, with moderately strong instructional scaffolding, regardless of program model.

However, DEEP classrooms demonstrated more consistent use of targeted instructional strategies aligned with the SoR. Teachers in DEEP schools were more likely to report implementing structured phonics routines, organizing small-group instruction, and using standardized diagnostic tools to assess student needs. For example, half of DEEP teachers reported using diagnostic assessments to measure phonemic awareness, compared to just over a third of teachers in non-DEEP schools. Additionally, DEEP educators described greater access to professional development opportunities, such as SIPPS and CRLP training, which they credited with enhancing their instructional clarity and confidence.

Parents and teachers in DEEP schools also highlighted the positive impact of Super Tuesday/Thursday programs, which offered extended literacy and enrichment time for students, especially multilingual learners. These supports were seen as critical in reinforcing classroom instruction, with parents noting that their children became more confident readers and felt more comfortable reading aloud at home. Together, these qualitative findings suggest that while overall achievement outcomes may not yet reflect large-scale differences, DEEP schools are providing more consistent and aligned instructional supports that could drive longer-term gains.

INTERPRETATION: LITERACY MODEL EFFECTS ARE SUBTLE AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENT

Although the DEEP model was not statistically associated with higher overall reading scores in this study, qualitative and implementation data suggests that it may contribute to deeper professional learning, instructional alignment, and student engagement, especially for vulnerable populations. The lack of a significant aggregate effect may reflect challenges in scaling complex instructional changes across schools, or it may signal the need for a longer implementation window to observe measurable gains.

Additionally, the strong negative effect of EL and IEP status on reading scores—despite interventions—suggests that neither program has yet fully addressed the needs of these learners. DEEP teachers, however, described stronger support in place, such as biliteracy PD, use of targeted curricula (e.g., SIPPS), and embedded coaching, all of which are associated with improved instructional readiness. While the overall program effect was not statistically significant, the consistent implementation of research-aligned practices and promising gains among English learners suggest that DEEP may yield greater benefits over time, particularly if the model is sustained and scaled.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

- While there was no statistically significant difference in overall literacy growth between DEEP and non-DEEP schools, the DEEP model appears to offer stronger instructional coherence, more consistent PD, and targeted support for specific subgroups.

- The persistent gaps in reading achievement for English learners and students with disabilities align with national research showing these groups are often underserved by core instruction alone. Many teachers across the Lincoln cluster expressed a need for more

targeted training in strategies for differentiation and language development, as well as access to adapted materials and co-teaching support. Addressing these disparities will require not only sustained instructional improvement but also the integration of inclusive teaching models, culturally and linguistically responsive resources, and a system for early identification and intervention.

- Absenteeism remains a major barrier to literacy development. Interventions targeting chronic absenteeism may yield greater returns than instructional improvements alone.

- Future evaluations should examine longitudinal outcomes over multiple years and analyze student subgroup trajectories, especially among multilingual learners in DEEP-supported schools.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final report represents the culmination of a two-year, mixed-methods evaluation of literacy instruction and outcomes across the Lincoln cluster of the San Diego Unified School District. It builds directly on the first interim report, which established a foundational understanding of the instructional landscape, professional development structures, and early impacts of the DEEP literacy model. This final report extends that work by deepening our analysis of instructional quality and student outcomes in grades 2–5 and by drawing broader implications for districtwide strategy.

Key Conclusions

1. **Professional Development Matters—Depth, Duration, and Design are Key**

   Teachers across the Lincoln cluster consistently demonstrate dedication to their students and a shared commitment to improving literacy outcomes. However, this evaluation confirms what national research has long shown: not all professional development is equally impactful. Teachers in DEEP schools who received over 50 hours of sustained, embedded, and targeted PD—especially through the CRLP and SIPPS—were significantly more likely to report changes in their instructional knowledge and practice. These teachers also had greater access to job-embedded coaching and more consistent opportunities for collaboration, echoing the recommendations from research experts on high-impact professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Kraft et al., 2018).

2. **Instructional Coherence is Stronger in DEEP Schools but Not yet Systemwide**

   DEEP schools implemented a more coherent instructional model, combining Benchmark Advance with structured phonics instruction (SIPPS), diagnostic assessment tools, and aligned coaching. In contrast, many non-DEEP schools relied on patchworked materials and inconsistent pacing. Teachers in both contexts expressed a need for more clarity around expectations, stronger alignment across grade levels, and greater access to resources for differentiating instruction, especially for English learners and students with disabilities. These gaps mirror national challenges described in our literature review, including variability in curriculum implementation and insufficient access to high-quality materials.

3. **Instructional Support is Solid, but Not Transformative Yet**

   Classroom observations showed that both DEEP and non-DEEP schools scored highly on emotional support and classroom organization, creating safe and well-managed environments for learning. Instructional support, which is measured by the quality of questioning, feedback, and language modeling, was adequate but showed room for growth. The fact that both models scored just above the "exceptional" threshold suggests that while instruction is generally strong, it may not be rigorous or differentiated enough to close persistent achievement gaps.

4. **Student Outcomes are Stable but Not Equitable**

   Quantitative analysis of reading growth revealed no statistically significant difference in overall achievement between students in DEEP and non-DEEP schools. However, English learners and students with IEPs continued to experience large deficits in reading performance scoring approximately 19 points lower than their peers. Chronic absenteeism also emerged as a major barrier to learning, with each missed day reducing scores by nearly a full point. These findings reinforce the urgent need for more responsive and inclusive instructional approaches, better early intervention systems, and schoolwide efforts to improve attendance.

5. **The DEEP Model Offers a Scalable Foundation for Literacy Reform**

   While the DEEP model did not produce statistically significant gains across the entire student population within the study period, it demonstrated key elements of success identified in national research: evidence-based instruction, sustained PD, embedded coaching, aligned curriculum, and family engagement. Importantly, DEEP showed promise for improving reading outcomes among English learners when coupled with biliteracy-informed training. The infrastructure developed through DEEP, particularly its use of SIPPS, CRLP, and Super Tuesday/Thursday programming. should serve as a prototype for districtwide scaling and refinement.

Recommendations

1. **Expand Access to High-Impact Professional Development**

   Adopt the most successful elements of the DEEP PD model districtwide. This includes:

   - Sustained (40+ hour), SoR-aligned training programs such as SIPPS and CRLP
   - Embedded coaching cycles with clear goals and regular follow-up
   - Tiered support to address foundational skills, comprehension, and multilingual literacy development
   - PLC structures focused on literacy routines, formative assessment, and lesson study

   These approaches align with national guidance on what works in professional learning (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Ellis et al., 2023) and should be made accessible to all teachers, not only those in DEEP schools.

2. **Ensure Curriculum Coherence and Access to Resources**

   As highlighted in both evaluation reports, many teachers still lack access to appropriately scaffolded materials, especially for struggling readers and English learners. The district should:

   - Codify expectations for tiered instruction and materials use (e.g., SIPPS, Heggerty, Really Great Reading as Tier 2/3)
   - Invest in decodable texts, screening tools, and materials for biliteracy transfer
   - Provide clear pacing guidance and resource maps to reduce variability in Benchmark Advance implementation
   - Create a "Literacy Resource Portal" for sharing vetted tools, lesson plans, and assessments

3. **Strengthen Instructional Coaching and Data-Use Structures**

   Embed literacy coaches into all cluster schools with dedicated time for co-planning, modeling, and feedback. Pair this with:

   - Regular data cycles focused on formative reading assessments
   - Teacher-friendly dashboards for tracking student growth
   - Site-based instructional leadership teams trained in analyzing and responding to data

   These steps will help build the capacity of teachers to use data meaningfully—an area consistently cited as underdeveloped in teacher interviews.

4. **Address Equity Gaps Through Early Identification and Tiered Supports**

   The stark underperformance of English learners and students with IEPs across both models demands urgent attention. SDUSD should:

   - Require all K–2 teachers to receive training in biliteracy development and culturally responsive pedagogy
   - Expand early screening and intervention programs across all elementary sites
   - Ensure that students with disabilities have access to adapted, high-quality instructional materials and trained co-teachers or specialists

5. **Extend and Integrate Family and Community-Based Literacy Supports**

   The DEEP program's after-school literacy and STEAM offerings (Super Tuesday/Thursday) have proven to be effective, particularly in fostering motivation and confidence. To build on this:

   - Scale after-school literacy programs to all Lincoln cluster schools using the DEEP model as a guide
   - Partner with families to deliver literacy workshops, home reading programs, and multilingual book access
   - Provide regular feedback to families on student progress and how they can help at home

MOVING FORWARD: FROM CLUSTER-BASED INNOVATION TO SYSTEMWIDE CHANGE

This final report completes a two-year learning journey across the Lincoln cluster. The interim report laid the foundation by identifying key areas of need and early signs of promise. This final report extends that learning by confirming that structured literacy supports, when implemented with coherence and consistency, improve teacher knowledge, classroom practice, and student engagement.

However, improving literacy outcomes, especially for English learners and students with disabilities, requires more than isolated program implementation. It demands systemwide transformation rooted in what the research makes clear: Teachers need sustained, embedded professional development; access to coherent, evidence-based curricula; dedicated coaching and planning time; and aligned family and community supports.

The district now stands at a pivotal moment. The work in DEEP schools has provided a roadmap. The findings in this report, reinforced by national best practices and two years of local evaluation, provide a blueprint for what must come next.

NEXT STEPS FOR SDUSD LEADERS AND DECISION-MAKERS

By taking the following actions, SDUSD can build on the foundation established in the Lincoln cluster and ensure that every child, regardless of background, has access to the high-quality reading instruction they need to thrive.

- Codify the DEEP literacy framework as a district model for comprehensive literacy support
- Invest equitably in high-need schools with similar infrastructure—PD, coaching, and resources
- Monitor progress longitudinally, with a focus on ELs and students with IEPs
- Create accountability structures to ensure consistent implementation and growth
- Continue research-practice partnerships to study long-term impacts and scale improvements

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TABLE

Descriptive characteristics of DEEP and non-DEEP schools in the Lincoln cluster

METRIC	DEEP SCHOOLS	NON DEEP SCHOOLS
% adults with bachelor's degree	13%	10%
Community Unemployment Rate	38%	40%
% students attending pre-K	45%	40%
% of students chronically absent	56%	60%
% of students suspended	1%	0%
% of English learners reclassified	10%	10%
% of teachers retained annually	94%	90%
% families with healthcare insurance	68%	60%
% families experiencing housing insecurity	17%	20%
Average work commute	5	10
% of community living above the poverty level	53%	40%
Average teacher FTEs at school	13	15
% of students feeling connected to school	64%	60%
% of students in healthy fitness zone	54%	50%
% families experiencing food insecurity	50%	40%
% of low-income students	91%	90%
% of homeless students	23%	10%
% of English leaners	38%	50%
% of inexperienced teachers	4%	10%
% of teachers with clear credentials	99%	100%
% of students meeting/exceeding SBAC ELA (Gr 3)	31%	30%
% of student meeting/exceeding SBAC Math (Gr 3)	23%	30%
% of Hispanic students	66%	70%
Average school enrollment	381	461
% of Hispanic teachers	19%	20%

APPENDIX A

EVALUATION GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The San Diego County Office of Education conducts evaluations in concert with the American Evaluation Association's (AEA) Guiding Principles for Evaluators, adopted in 1994 and revised in 2004. These principles guide the professional practice of evaluators and inform clients and the public about the standards they should expect. Below is a summary of the key principles:

1. **Systematic Inquiry:** Evaluators are expected to conduct methodical, data-driven inquiries and adhere to the highest technical standards. They should fully communicate their methods and approaches, acknowledge the limitations of their evaluations, and discuss any values, assumptions, or theories that significantly affect their findings.

2. **Competence:** Evaluators must provide competent performance and possess the necessary education, skills, and experience. They should demonstrate cultural competence, respecting diversity in all forms, and continuously seek to improve their evaluation skills and knowledge.

3. **Integrity/Honesty:** Evaluators should display honesty in their dealings with clients and stakeholders, negotiate openly about evaluation scopes and limitations, and avoid conflicts of interest. They should maintain integrity throughout the evaluation process, making any project changes transparent and striving to prevent misuse of their work.

4. **Respect for People:** Evaluators should respect the dignity and self-worth of all involved in an evaluation, consider all contextual elements that might influence results, and adhere to ethical standards concerning risks and confidentiality. They should communicate negative findings carefully to minimize harm while maintaining evaluation integrity.

5. **Responsibilities for General and Public Welfare:** Evaluators should consider the diverse interests and values of all stakeholders and the broader implications of their evaluations. They must balance the needs of their clients with broader public interests, especially when funded by public resources, and strive to serve the general public good.

These principles aim to foster a responsible and ethical evaluation practice that respects all participants and stakeholders while maintaining high professional standards.

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