



Improving Literacy Instruction in California

THIS BRIEF SUMMARIZES FIVE SAN DIEGO COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION EVALUATION REPORTS ON LOCAL AND STATEWIDE LITERACY INITIATIVES ACROSS CALIFORNIA:

Lincoln Cluster Literacy Program: Year 2 Insights and Summative Report

Shannon Coulter, 2025

Every Child Reads: Summative Report

Shannon Coulter, 2025

Uplift Literacy: Annual Report

Shannon Coulter, 2024

Project ARISE: Year 3 Insights

Kirstin Northenscold, 2025

Project CLEAR California Learning Acceleration System Grant: Annual Report

Juan Carlos Torres, 2025

These studies can be found at www.sdcoe.net/evaluation-services.

Introduction

California has invested heavily in programs supporting the development of high-quality reading instruction. Post-pandemic California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) scores, erasing years of consistent growth, highlighted the need for a renewed focus on literacy instruction. Additionally, persistent opportunity gaps – particularly affecting multilingual learners and students with disabilities – underscore the need for equitable access to quality education and targeted early literacy interventions.

This brief takes up the dual topics of literacy professional development and instruction supporting English language achievement. Understanding both how literacy professional development is implemented and the impact of instruction on student academic achievement is essential to support the appropriate allocation and use of resources across schools, districts, and the state to encourage student growth.

This brief is designed for district and county leaders as well as statewide policymakers. The studies represented in this brief highlight potential local, regional, and statewide opportunities to strengthen literacy instruction and literacy professional development. The findings and recommendations contribute to California’s broader literacy agenda to ensure all students achieve reading proficiency.

Key Findings

- **Ongoing professional development with coaching positively impacts instruction; more common, though, is infrequent, inconsistent professional development disconnected from daily practice and lacking feedback cycles.**
- **Local literacy assessments more nimbly reflect student growth than statewide tests and can be used to support ongoing coaching and to inform teachers’ instructional choices and provide intensive support.**
- **Diverse learners, particularly English learners (ELs) and students with disabilities (SWD), succeed when research-backed literacy instruction is most consistently implemented by teachers and students have access to rigorous, grade-level content.**
- **Reading instruction that heavily prioritizes rote practice avoids opportunities for student discourse and integration of reading comprehension strategies, ultimately limiting students’ progress toward skillful reading.**

Summary of Key Findings

Ongoing professional development with coaching positively impacts instruction; more common, though, is infrequent, inconsistent professional development disconnected from daily practice and lacking feedback cycles.

California has invested heavily in professional development to encourage effective literacy instruction across the state. Assembly Bill 1454, signed into law in October of 2025, focuses efforts on research-backed instructional materials, revising standards for reading specialists and administrators, and disseminating professional development opportunities that align to research-backed literacy instruction practices. More broadly, the Golden State Literacy Plan outlines continued funding for literacy coaching and reading specialists.

LITERACY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EFFECTS

Project	Professional Development Type	Effects on Educator Knowledge and Beliefs	Observed Instructional Change
ARISE, CLEAR	Online learning	Strong effects on beliefs and skills, especially for intensive intervention strategy content	Direct application of content in synchronous online learning environments with online course instructor
ARISE, Uplift	Periodic workshops	Strong effects on beliefs and skills, especially for content focused on multilingual learners	Content materials are sometimes applied directly in teaching, but little effect on either instruction quality or student literacy gains
ARISE, DEEP	Regular, on-site trainings	Strong effects on beliefs and skills, especially for curriculum implementation	Direct application of content and increases in local literacy achievement
ARISE, DEEP, Every Child Reads	Coaching	Strong effects on beliefs and skills, especially for foundational skills curriculum implementation	Direct application of content and increases in local literacy achievement

Our studies find that ongoing professional development supporting reading instruction and intervention practices positively impacts educators. The degree to which this professional development results in changes to instruction, though, depends on the frequency of the professional development, its direct and immediate applicability to classroom practice, and the consistency of coaching support. Ongoing, on-site professional development with embedded cycles of data collection, observations, and feedback supports educators to enact and sustain new instructional practices connected to the adopted curriculum.

Often, however, professional development is infrequent, lengthy, and curriculum-agnostic. This design maximizes reach and minimizes time, allowing professional development facilitators to pack in content delivered to multiple audiences simultaneously. For programs attempting to scale across multiple sites, districts, and even counties without additional funding or program restructuring, this choice makes sense. While efficient, this design does not prove to be effective in sustainably changing practice. With sustained feedback cycles and training directly connected to current classroom content, though, educators more reliably enact program-aligned instruction.

As state agencies attempt to scale instruction and intervention practices regionally, online learning models will likely remain a key mode of delivery. Our studies demonstrate that online learning works best with direct and explicit connections to classroom practice and opportunities to try new strategies and receive feedback. Without feedback mechanisms and synchronous support, online learning lacks accountability structures to ensure implementation. Content focused on specialized intensive intervention models, such as Data-Based Individualization or Reading Recovery, show potential as impactful online learning foci.

Local literacy scores more nimbly reflect student growth than statewide tests and can be used to support ongoing professional development design and to inform teachers' instructional choices and provide intensive support.

Recent California legislation requiring the administration of a Reading Difficulties Risk Screener (RDRS), available in English and Spanish to students in grades K-2, acknowledges the importance of utilizing ongoing local assessments to inform instruction and intervene early when students demonstrate a risk of reading difficulty. Summative assessments, like the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), provide important information to guide local and state policy.

For programs encouraging the implementation of instructional practices, though, summative assessments do not reflect real-time improvement and change. This is especially true in programs addressing early literacy in grades K-2, a time of important foundational skill development.

These studies found that local literacy assessments provide valid insights into the impact of instruction on students. In some districts, schools saw significant growth between fall and spring assessments. Additionally, growth for students with disabilities (SWD) and English learners (ELs) was visible. For example, in one small, rural district, growth on statewide assessments for ELs was minimal, while EL proficiency rates on the local literacy assessment increased by 20%.

Local literacy assessments, when administered multiple times within one year, can support educators to make informed decisions about instruction and, when needed, apply appropriate interventions. Additionally, local assessments can support educators to progress monitor and adjust interventions. We encourage administrators to use local literacy assessment data to celebrate growth and to provide clear guidance for instructional next steps. With four literacy screeners available at no cost across California, these tools should be used not only to inform instruction but also to assess growth toward program goals.

Diverse learners, particularly English learners (ELs) and students with disabilities (SWD), succeed when research-backed literacy instruction is most consistently implemented by teachers and students have access to rigorous, grade-level content.

California's EL population totals over one million students, representing almost 20% of the state's student population. Roughly 12% of California students receive special education services. Across multiple California literacy initiatives, ELs, SWD, and dually identified students are identified as key student groups in project outcomes.

These studies found that, despite a clear focus on ELs and SWD across program goals, these groups are much less likely to demonstrate reading proficiency than their peers. In some schools, SWD literacy proficiency is weakening over multiple years, with negative average growth rates on local literacy assessments.

In one program demonstrating the most instructional coherence across and within schools – and a clear focus on foundational literacy skills – ELs showed significant growth. In another program with consistent foundational skills instruction and high scores on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) across all sites, ELs and SWDs demonstrated significant growth.

ELs and SWD need access to rigorous, grade-level content best delivered by the classroom teacher. However, numerous classroom observations confirm that too often differentiation is accomplished through technology without formative feedback from educators. Prior research has demonstrated that ability grouping limits the literacy development of lower-performing students, a group

overrepresented by ELs and SWDs (Chorzempa & Graham, 2006; Lleras & Rangel, 2009). Our studies found promising results for ELs when educators reliably implemented direct, explicit foundational literacy instruction within rich educational environments.

Reading instruction that heavily prioritizes rote practice avoids opportunities for student discourse and integration of reading comprehension strategies, ultimately limiting students' progress toward skillful reading.

For decades, the National Reading Panel has stressed five core components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). Instruction focused on building students' vocabulary and comprehension provides opportunities for students to meaningfully develop critical thinking and language skills. Research has consistently pointed to the interrelation of the five core components of reading instruction, which should be addressed concurrently and iteratively, not consecutively or chronologically.

Our studies found that across classroom observations of literacy instruction, the first three components of reading instruction were consistently present: phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency. Vocabulary development and comprehension strategies, though, were less frequently observed in classrooms across this study. Participating educators had access to professional development focused on all five components of reading instruction.

Two studies utilized the CLASS observation tool to assess instruction. In one, only 13% of all observed classrooms met the minimum threshold for the instructional domain associated with discourse, critical thinking, and analysis – all critical to reading comprehension. In this study, higher CLASS scores were positively related to fall to spring growth in local literacy scores. Some students were engaged in rich learning experiences and environments. More were not. The overemphasis on the rote components of reading instruction, without attention to comprehension strategies, will not support students to become skilled readers.

These studies found that students in many classrooms across California are not talking, connecting with others, or extending their thinking. Instruction is not providing students with enough opportunities to develop skills associated with reading comprehension, such as interpersonal communication, creativity, and critical thinking. Professional development should explicitly model comprehension instruction, including dialogic reading, questioning strategies, and opportunities for academic talk.

Conclusion

Effective literacy instruction – and effective literacy professional development – integrates and intertwines the five components of reading instruction to support the development of all readers, ensuring diverse learners, like ELs and SWD, consistently receive instruction aligned to rigorous, grade-level content. Effective literacy instruction utilizes data from local assessments to inform next steps, progress monitor, and support coaching feedback cycles. Effective literacy professional development is curriculum-aligned, actionable, and data-informed, often including coaching. When professional development includes these components, reading instruction and intervention is more effective and can lead to learning gains for students.

Schools, districts, and counties can take action, ensuring all students have access to high-quality literacy instruction:

- 1. Fund on-site professional development models with coaching.**
- 2. Establish common reporting standards for local literacy assessments.**
- 3. Integrate comprehension and discourse strategies into all literacy professional development.**
- 4. Align scaffolds and strategies for ELs and SWD to core literacy instruction rather than separate interventions.**



References

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