

Five leadership practices that drive success in K–2 literacy



Table of contents

Executive summary 4

Introduction 6

Methodology 7

Leadership practices for early literacy 8

Conclusion 12

Appendix: Schools visited 13



Executive summary

Third grade: it's known to be the make-or-break moment for reading. Students who are not proficient in reading before entering fourth grade are much more likely than their peers to struggle in school, and much more likely to drop out. That's because fourth graders, ideally, are no longer learning to read—they're "reading to learn." So in order to make sure all students can learn everything they need to learn in their school years, it is imperative that **we provide K–2 students with the firmest possible foundation in literacy.**

It is imperative—and it is within reach. **This paper explores how a diverse set of schools, including high-need schools, have achieved measurable, notable success in K–2 literacy.**

Amplify's experts identified a group of 11 schools where mCLASS data showed exceptional growth in student literacy. These schools represented wide geographic and socio-economic diversity, including several with high rates of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch.

These schools **significantly raised the percentage of their students reading at grade level by end of second grade**. Specifically, kindergarteners tended to start with lower skill levels than average—but then improved to the point that, by the end of 2nd grade, the percentage of students reading at or above grade level surpassed many other schools across our national mCLASS user base.

We visited these schools, and we analyzed which actions and practices—among district leaders, school leaders, teachers, and other school staff—contributed to this success. Our observation: Leaders in these schools identified literacy as a priority, but did not stop there. They put that priority into practice in their daily scheduling, deployment of teaching talent, leveraging of data, and engaging of students in their own success. They:

- 1 **Made early literacy priority number one**, positioning it as fundamental to all other academics and ensuring teacher access to coaching and classroom support.
- 2 **Treated reading instruction time as sacred**, scheduling literacy blocks first thing in the morning and helping teachers make the most of them.
- 3 **Empowered teachers to own and lead intervention**, starting early for swiftest results.
- 4 **Monitored processes and data closely**, providing consistent checks and feedback.
- 5 **Shared granular data with students** so they and teachers worked as a team to succeed.

In this research, we see the results of strong, committed leadership plus strong, comprehensive data that helps educators drive significant progress for their students. Data also allows the sharing of best practices—as we do here—to help ensure that all students have access to the skill, power, and joy of reading.

Introduction

Literacy is essential. Like many other important endeavors, it even has a deadline. “Reading proficiently by the end of third grade can be a make-or-break benchmark in a child’s educational development,” warns a special report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.¹ That’s because fourth grade is where students make the shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”—using their reading skills to learn other subjects. And students who are not on track with reading by grade 3 are four times less likely than their peers to graduate by age 19—or at all.²

School and district leaders—and, obviously, teachers—are no doubt aware of the gravity of this challenge. And it’s not just about gravity; it’s about **opportunity**—making the most of the earliest chance to launch students into a lifetime of loving to read. That’s why educators ask this fundamental question: **How can we make sure that all our students learn to read—by 3rd grade?**

Often, our answers to that question focus on deficits: educational inequity, lack of resources. Those answers are not wrong, and those deficits must be addressed. But we do know that the right approach to core K–2 literacy instruction can give kids the right start, getting—and keeping—kids on track early. When necessary, it also offers students a chance, if not the chance, to catch up. With the right tools, spot-on instruction, and an all-in environment, all kids can achieve great results.

How do we know that? **We went directly into schools and classrooms using the mCLASS early reading assessment program that get those great results—and we evaluated their tactics and solutions.**

Specifically, Amplify’s team of researchers and educators selected a highly diverse assortment of schools around the country where mCLASS data indicated exceptional growth in student literacy—and where, as we observed, teachers and students approached reading instruction with palpable energy, enthusiasm, and pride. We asked: How did schools like these get there? **What specific actions do schools take that demonstrate a serious commitment to improving literacy? And which ones get results?**

In these schools, leaders adopt a set of practices that result in unusually high levels of growth for their students, and that create an educational culture where reading is paramount. **For this reason, we call these administrators “literacy leaders.”** The practices of literacy leaders include prioritizing literacy above all else, maintaining transparency, and cultivating school-wide buy-in. In short, they leave nothing to chance, and they include everyone.

1 https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-Early_Warning_Full_Report-2010.pdf

2 <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED518818>

Methodology

What practices support success in K–2 literacy? We looked at a diverse array of public schools that are achieving exceptional results in DIBELS Next on our mCLASS platform. What were those results, and what specific practices seemed to drive them?

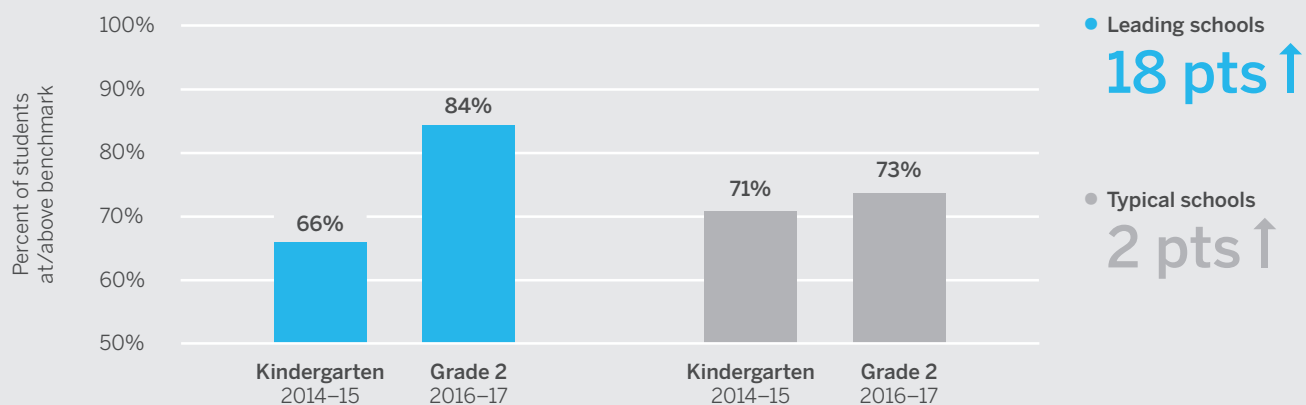
First, we identified a set of promising schools that, mCLASS data showed, had made notable progress in raising the percentage of their students who could read at grade level by end of second grade. We then visited 11 of these schools in the south, northeast, midwest, and west representing a mix of urban, suburban, and rural, along with wide socio-economic diversity.

For most students the acquisition of the essential skills to support literacy occurs during the progression from kindergarten to 2nd grade. We tracked student cohorts as they made this journey. Our analysis showed that typical schools made limited progress in raising the percent of its students who were on track to acquire these skills by the end of second grade.

We also found many schools that bucked this trend. In these schools, kindergarteners tended to start with lower skill levels than in typical schools—but then improved to the point that by the end of 2nd grade, the percentage of students reading at or above grade level surpassed most other schools across our national user base. In fact, they were in the **top third** of all schools studied. These schools have been able to ensure that most students who started this journey with grade-level skills made appropriate growth and stayed on track, and that a sizeable group of students who started the journey behind caught up to performing at grade level—a task that becomes more and more more difficult as students reach 2nd grade. (Please see Table 1 below.) Given this clear and impressive increase in the percentage of students who were on track in these schools, we selected 11 to visit in order to understand what their leaders and staffs were doing to drive such significant gains for their students.

Table 1: Comparison of 11 leading schools' and typical schools' growth

Percent of students on track – Kindergarten through grade 2





Leadership practices for early literacy

The schools in our study vary widely in terms of location, size, educational approach, and socio-economic level. **Among this group, even the high-need schools—those with high rates of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch—were able to attain success in literacy growth.** That diversity makes the commonalities around successful leadership practices that much more salient—and it suggests that the practices we observed are indeed effective enough to meet even the tough challenges present in high-need schools.

What unites these schools in their literacy leadership is this: they create the environment for success, and then they support it with staff, time, and other resources.

Here are the leadership behaviors for early literacy success that we observed across schools:

Treat reading instruction time as sacred.

“Time in text is critical,” one Utah-based reading specialist told us. “Our students consistently practice early literacy skills and apply their learnings in connected text.” How do literacy leaders make the most of the literacy instruction time they have?

- **They put literacy blocks first—literally.** Their master schedules place 90 to 120-minute **uninterrupted** instruction blocks in the morning, when everyone’s fresh. (Of course, these blocks do include a mix of activities: whole group, small group, individual—rarely were students sitting in the same place doing the same thing for more than 10 minutes.)
- **Teachers across the same grade stick to the agreed-upon schedule.** This sounds simple but, as educators know, in practice it requires a commitment and a high level of respect among staff.
- **No wasted time: transitions from core to intervention are quick and efficient—**less than one minute to move from class to class. Other schools we have observed spend up to three minutes transitioning. That two-minute difference may not sound like much, but if you do the math³, you’ll see that it could give you up to six more hours of additional instruction.⁴ Our researchers noted that in classrooms where transitions were most swift and smooth, teachers had bought into the value of the endeavor and committed to making them happen through teamwork, practice, and sticking to both a clear schedule and consistent expectations for their students.
- **Leaders make sure that the agreed-upon curriculum is followed consistently and implemented with fidelity in each classroom.** This consistency helps ensure that early literacy skills received the necessary attention and that key concepts were not missed or skipped over.
- **For both core instruction and supplemental instructional time, students spend more time in small, dynamic groups than in whole-class instruction.** This approach allows for more quality student/teacher interaction that is more focused on a given student’s specific needs and learning styles.

3 Let’s say, 2 minutes x 180 school days = 360 minutes = 6 hours.

4 For more on mastering tight transitions, see *Teach Like A Champion*—specifically, technique 30—by Doug Lemov.



Make early literacy priority number one.

It's relatively easy—and certainly important—to say that early literacy is a, if not the, priority in K–2 classrooms. But what does that look like in practice?

- **Leaders make sure that teachers have access to early literacy professional development, including coaching, throughout the year.** Teachers' lessons are regularly observed by school-level leaders and supported by detailed feedback about areas of strength and improvement. Areas of improvement are supported by additional coaching, including observation of other teachers who excel in the area of improvement.
- **Literacy supports and intervention come before math intervention.** Leaders in these schools believe that a strong reading foundation is key to success in math and other subjects and therefore prioritize it above all other programming.
- **Multiple adults can help.** In the K and first-grade classrooms we observed, there were typically two or more adults present in the room, whether two teachers, a teacher and an aide, or a teacher and a community volunteer. The presence of multiple adults allows for small group instruction where kids are not left alone in a group, making them more likely to stay on task and get questions answered right away. Multiple adults also help with transition time and efficiency.



Make sure teachers own the process of intervention.

We know that challenges can arise for teachers when intervention materials are different from core instructional content, or when insufficient planning or communication leave them unaware of what's happening in intervention in the first place. But at schools run by literacy leaders, teachers are more than just “aware.” As a Texas principal told us: “Our teachers own intervention and work with each student until skills are mastered. “This way we are able to prevent gaps from forming.” Specifically:

- **Teachers lead intervention efforts.**
- **Teachers are matched strategically with students.** For example, a school would make sure that a student struggling with phonemic awareness is paired with the teacher best at teaching it.
- **Intervention and core materials use the same vocabulary and typically sequence early literacy skills in the same manner.** At times, upcoming core concepts are also previewed during intervention.
- **Intervention happens early.** Any gaps are identified and addressed immediately.



Monitor processes and data closely.

Literacy leaders know exactly what's going on with student progress in reading. At these schools, leaders:

- don't just establish processes for data review, curriculum progress, efficient transitions, and so on; they have checks to make sure these processes are in use and effective.
- receive mCLASS and other formative assessment reports at the student level, observe classrooms, and provide (non-negotiable, highly-organized) weekly or bi-weekly feedback to teachers about adjusting instruction and intervention.



Make sure teachers have the tools to let students know where they stand.

“You have to have high expectations and set goals with your students from day one,” a first-grade teacher told us. “Students need to be involved with their learning and have an understanding of what they need to accomplish.” At the schools that showed significant growth, the goals are specific and the data is transparent at all grades. Here's how that works:

- Skill-level mCLASS data and other data are used to evaluate every student's specific needs.
- Teachers share data with students and speak in specifics, addressing their phonemic awareness skills, alphabetic principle, fluency, accuracy, or comprehension. They look together at the students' latest benchmark or progress monitoring data and chart out where they are and where they are going. The kids know in detail where they are for each skill and where they need to be.

Conclusion

What works to drive early literacy success for your students? Strong, committed leadership plus strong, comprehensive data that enables insight and action for individual students, teachers, and building and district leaders. And our observations were made possible not only because we observed, but also because we had access to the data that let us know these schools were standouts in the first place. Data also allows us to share best practices—as we do here—to help ensure that all students have access to the skill, power, and joy of reading.



Appendix: Schools visited

Thank you for sharing your best practices.

Chicago Public Schools, IL: Chavez Elementary

Cumberland County Schools, NC: Margaret Willis Elementary

Cumberland County Schools, NC: Sherwood Park Elementary

Granite School District, UT: Calvin Smith Elementary

IDEA Public Schools, TX: Edinburg Campus

IDEA Public Schools, TX: Weslaco Campus

Indianapolis Public Schools, IN: Rousseau McClellan Montessori School

Johnston County Schools, NC: Dixon Road Elementary

North Lawrence Community Schools, IN: Stalker Elementary

Norwalk Public Schools, CT: Fox Run Elementary

Person County Schools, NC: Helena Elementary

For more insights and observations from Amplify's experts, visit **[amplify.com](https://www.amplify.com)**.

Amplify.

© 2018 Amplify Education, Inc.
All trademarks and copyrights are the property of Amplify or its licensors.