LEARNING EQUITY &
ACADEMIC RECOVERY

THE NEW JERSEY LITERACY FRAMEWORK

A Guide to Evidence-Based Literacy Practices & Universal Screeners

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The New Jersey Literacy Framework
A Guide to Evidence-Based Literacy Practices & Universal Screeners

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Finally, this guidance is deeply informed by the recommendation report of the Working Group on Student Literacy, established pursuant to P.L.2024, c.52. The Department thanks the Working Group and all who contributed to its research for their invaluable support.

Introduction and Purpose

In August 2024, Governor Phil Murphy signed P.L. 2024, c.52 into law, reinforcing the State's commitment to improving literacy outcomes for students. This legislation builds on recent revisions to the New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS), dyslexia legislation, and the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS), initiating a broader effort to refine instructional literacy practices based on robust research in reading and learning. The legislation establishes a comprehensive plan to ensure that young learners benefit from evidence-based literacy instruction by requiring districts to:

- Administer literacy screeners twice a year for students grades Kindergarten through grade third (K–3).
- Provide support for students consistent with NJTSS and Intervention and Referral Services.[1]
- Notify families within 30 days after the close of the screening period.
- Report screening data to the NJDOE.
- Provide professional development to preschool through grade six staff including:
    - Library media specialists
    - Professionals who support multilingual learners (MLs) and students with disabilities
    - Reading and early literacy specialists
    - Speech-language specialists

To support implementation, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) has developed and published this guidance which includes the following:

- Acceptable and reliable universal screening instruments
- High-quality literacy instructional materials
- Best practices for frequency of screening students in grades K–3 and grades 4–12
- Data analysis strategies for high-quality literacy instruction and intervention

[1] New Jersey Tiered System of Support (NJTSS) is New Jersey's framework of supports and interventions to improve student achievement, based on the core components of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and the three tier prevention logic of Response to Intervention.

Intervention and Referral Services is an interdisciplinary team of professionals within the school environment who come together throughout the school year to formulate coordinated services and team delivery systems to address the full range of student learning, behavior, social, and health problems in the general education program as well as for students determined to be in need of special education programs and services (N.J.A.C 6A:16-8.1-2).

This guidance is intended to help school districts develop and implement evidence-based reading instruction and a system of universal screening aimed at creating a strong early literacy program that helps students early, fills in skill gaps, and gives them the support they need to succeed. Many school districts are already implementing evidence-based literacy practices, and this legislation presents a valuable opportunity to strengthen those practices, refine ongoing initiatives, and expand effective instructional strategies.

This guidance document is the first of two documents in the NJDOE's guidance series. The NJDOE plans to release the second document in the coming months, focusing on defining high-quality instructional materials and offering guidance to districts on selecting, adopting, and implementing them. For ongoing updates, please visit the NJDOE's Learning Equity and Academic Recovery webpage.

Effective Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction

Overview

For decades, research across multiple disciplines — educational sciences, neuroscience, and cognitive psychology — has significantly advanced the understanding of how children learn, why some students experience difficulties building literacy skills, and the types of support needed to effectively address these challenges (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2021). Literacy is a language-based skill set (Kamhi & Catts, 2012; Perfetti, 2010; Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1994). Language provides the foundation for literacy development as the emerging reader's skill acquisition in oral language (listening and speaking) and written language (reading and writing) influence each other in different reciprocal ways at different points of development (Van Kleeck, 1990; Kamhi & Catts, 1989; Stanovich, 1986).

An extensive body of research has led to a strong scientific consensus on the importance of evidence-based literacy instruction, as highlighted in the National Reading Panel Report *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), which emphasizes the need for explicit, systematic instruction to help students develop the essential skills required for proficient reading (Foorman et al., 2016; Shanahan et al., 2010). These principles are incorporated in the latest revisions of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

Specifically, students with strong word recognition skills, including phonemic awareness, decoding, and sight recognition, may still struggle with reading comprehension if they lack the necessary language comprehension abilities to extract and interpret meaning from text. Conversely, students with strong language comprehension abilities may also struggle with reading comprehension if they lack the word recognition skills necessary to read printed text with accuracy and fluency. Both skill areas are essential for developing fluent reading skills that support comprehension—the ability to effectively construct and interpret meaning from text (Catts, Adlof, & Weismer, 2006).

Watch this brief video titled The Simple View of Reading to learn more. The videos embedded throughout the guidance document have been created by the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports for Early Reading (NJTSS-ER), which was established through a series of U.S. Department of Education Personnel Development Grants via a partnership between Rutgers University and the NJDOE. The videos provide an extension and can be utilized to support professional learning.

Why it Matters

Numerous studies indicate that children who struggle with reading by the conclusion of first grade are much less likely to achieve average reading abilities by the end of elementary school unless they receive meaningful and consistent intervention (Franciset et al, 1996; Juel, 1988; Lonigan et al., 2011; Torgesen & Burgess, 1998). However, studies also indicate that with evidence-based instruction, the number of first graders performing below the 30th percentile can be greatly reduced. This research suggests that when skilled educators provide high-quality, evidence-based reading instruction, at least 95% of students can achieve reading proficiency (Moats, 2020; Torgesen, 2004).

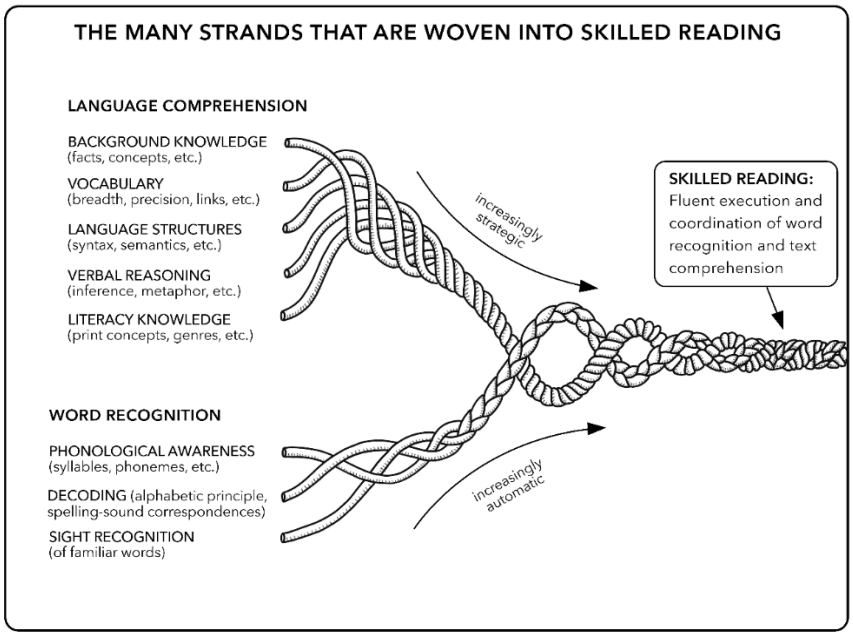
While national metrics typically place New Jersey among the leading states for reading proficiency in the country, the NJDOE recognizes the urgency in addressing learning gaps and raising academic achievement for all students. New Jersey is not spared, for example, from national disparities in academic performance based on factors such as race/ethnicity, disability, multilingual learner status, and family income. These trends are mirrored in the State's New Jersey Student Learning Assessment (NJSLA) English Language Arts data for grade 4 (NJDOE, 2024).

What Our Students Need

Given this body of research, it is crucial that all students receive core reading instruction that reinforces cumulative skill development across both word recognition and language comprehension component factors of reading comprehension — particularly in preschool through third grade, as supported by the NJSLS. This approach ensures universal access to a solid early literacy foundation, reducing the number of students needing intensive interventions while supporting long-term reading success (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2021).

Integrated, comprehensive literacy instruction is essential for developing skilled reading, as illustrated by Hollis Scarborough's (2001) Reading Rope model. This model highlights the multifaceted nature of reading, which develops gradually through years of simultaneous instruction and practice across preschool to grade twelve. The figure of the reading rope visually represents the numerous interwoven skills required for reading comprehension. Over time, language comprehension becomes increasingly strategic, while word recognition skills become increasingly automatic. As these strands intertwine, students' progress toward skilled reading, fluently coordinating word recognition, and text comprehension.

Figure 1: Reading Rope Model



Text Version: Reading Rope Model

Word recognition enables readers to identify words in print accurately, without conscious effort. Research consistently underscores the importance of explicit, systematic reading instruction that fosters phonological (oral language) and orthographic (written language) processing and early development of word recognition skills in the areas of phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition (Scarborough, 2001). Development of these skills begins far before children start preschool and need to be fostered intentionally as they prepare for later learning in kindergarten and beyond. The following represent and describe the components of word recognition:

- **Phonological awareness** is the understanding of the sound structure of language, including recognizing that sentences consist of words, words consist of syllables, and syllables can be broken into smaller sound units, such as onsets, rimes, and phonemes. Phonemic awareness, the understanding of the individual sound units in spoken words (phonemes), is essential for linking phonemes to letters or letter combinations (graphemes) in printed words.

- **Decoding** is the process of applying knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences to blend and read words. It involves phonemic awareness and an understanding of the alphabetic principle — the insight that graphemes represent the phonemes in spoken words. This process is reciprocal with encoding, the process of applying knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondences to segment and write words, also known as spelling.

- **Sight recognition** (automatic word recognition) refers to word reading fluency — the ability to instantly and effortlessly recognize and read familiar words. It is crucial for fluent reading because automatic word recognition frees up cognitive resources, allowing for stronger reading comprehension.

Although automatic word recognition may seem effortless for skilled readers, it actually results from efficient phonological and orthographic processing in the reading brain. Orthographic knowledge is developed through explicit decoding and encoding instruction that supports both phonological awareness and orthographic mapping. Additionally, extensive oral language exposure and reading and writing practice help strengthen and enable instant phonological and orthographic retrieval.

Watch this video, created in partnership by Rutgers University and the NJDOE through the NJTSS-ER project, titled Instruction in Word Recognition to learn more.

Language comprehension provides the oral language foundation for readers to integrate and organize information from various linguistic systems to derive meaning from both spoken and written language. Research highlights the importance of reading instruction that supports students in understanding and making connections from what they read. This includes an underlying base of background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge (Scarborough, 2001). The following represent and describe the components of language comprehension:

- **Background knowledge** is the prior knowledge, including facts, concepts, beliefs, and experiences, that helps readers make inferences and connect new information with what they already know.
- **Vocabulary** is the knowledge of word meanings that impacts readers' ability to comprehend language, including breadth (number of words known), depth (understanding of words in context), and precision (accurate use of words).
- **Language** structure includes the understanding of semantics (meaning-based relationships between words and sentences) and syntax (grammar and word arrangement) that helps readers interpret texts.
- **Verbal reasoning** is the ability to use language to reason, which helps readers make inferences, understand figurative language such as metaphors, sequence information, and predict outcomes.
- **Literacy knowledge** is the awareness of text organization, print concepts (letters, words, punctuation), and genre-specific reading strategies that readers need to support reading comprehension.

Proficient reading comprehension and writing depends on a strong foundation in language comprehension. While instructional strategies like questioning, visualization, and summarizing support students' reading comprehension, they cannot replace the deeper linguistic and cognitive framework necessary for understanding a text one is reading and expressing oneself through writing. This foundation includes a broad knowledge base, a rich and flexible vocabulary, an understanding of language structures, the ability to engage in verbal reasoning, and an awareness of print conventions and text organization.

Watch this video, created in partnership by Rutgers University and the NJDOE through the NJTSS-ER project, titled Instruction in Language Comprehension to learn more.

It is important to note that while this guidance focuses on evidence-based reading instruction as outlined in the legislation, conversations that foster language comprehension and writing instruction will also play a reciprocal role in supporting reading skill development. Building of oral language is particularly critical for young children in preschool and kindergarten and so merits as much intentional focus as other areas addressed by the rope. Additional guidance on writing instruction will be provided in the future.

For professional development to meet the requirements of P.L. 2024, c.52 for evidence-based literacy instruction, the Department will be releasing professional development by the Fall 2025, visit the Office of Learning Equity and Academic Recovery website for updates.

Criteria for Identifying and Implementing Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction

In addition to emphasizing an integrated, comprehensive focus on both word recognition and language comprehension skill development, reading instruction should align with research-based guidelines for effective teaching. Research (Foorman et al., 2016; Shanahan et al., 2010; Wanzek et al., 2018; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007) highlights several essential components of evidence-based instruction as well as the key features of effective implementation (Clemens et al, 2016; Gersten et al., 2008; Glover & Vaughn, 2010; Pullen & Kennedy, 2018).

Essential Components of Evidence-Based Instruction

To ensure that students acquire the skills and strategies necessary for proficient reading comprehension, the following features should be incorporated into instructional practice appropriately across preschool to grade twelve (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Fisher & Frey, 2008):

- **Clearly Defined and Communicated Learning Objectives:** Teachers should clearly articulate the specific skills or strategies students will learn, as well as how students are expected to demonstrate their understanding by the end of the lesson.
- **Direct Instruction**: Teachers should introduce new skills or strategies through explicit instruction that includes verbal explanations, demonstrations and modeling, and the rationale behind specific steps or processes.
- **Guided Student Practice with Feedback**: Teachers should provide opportunities for students to practice newly taught skills or strategies, with immediate feedback and scaffolding provided where necessary.
- **Independent Student Practice**: After providing initial guidance, teachers should give students opportunities to practice and apply the skills or strategies independently, without teacher assistance.

- **Checks for Understanding and Mastery**: Teachers should use redefined mastery criteria to assess whether students have mastered the skills or strategies taught, and to determine if additional instructional support or intervention is needed.

To learn more about the use of these in kindergarten through grade 12, watch the below videos, created in partnership by Rutgers University and the NJDOE through the NJTSS-ER project:

- Elements of Effective Instruction: Word Recognition
- Elements of Effective Instruction: Language Comprehension

When implemented with fidelity, Tier 1 core instruction aligned to evidence-based literacy instruction should address the learning needs of the majority of students (e.g., approximately 80% or greater), enabling them to meet or exceed benchmark performance expectations for foundational early reading skills (see Connection to New Jersey Tiered System of Supports section for more information). If Tier 1 is not meeting the majority of students' learning needs, it is important to use information on student performance and implemented instruction to guide changes to core instruction to reduce the strain on limited intervention resources.

Watch this brief video, created in partnership by Rutgers University and the NJDOE through the NJTSS-ER project, Analyzing Tier 1 Core Instruction to learn more.

Intensification of Differentiated Instruction and Intervention

It is important that small-group differentiated instruction provided as part of Tier 1 and intervention at Tier 2 and Tier 3 align closely with these essential components of evidence-based instruction, creating a seamless experience for students in which supports are embedded across multiple tiers.

Research has identified key dimensions for intensifying both differentiated instruction and interventions to meet the unique needs of each student, ensuring that every learner receives the appropriate support for their academic success across preschool to grade twelve (Fuchs, Fuchs & Malone, 2017). These intensity dimensions include:

- **Strength** refers to the efficacy of the instruction/intervention or its likeliness in producing meaningful positive outcomes for students with few adjustments. It is often quantified in effect sizes.
- **Dosage** refers to the student group size, instruction/intervention session duration, and weekly session frequency, all of which determine the total number of opportunities for students to respond and receive corrective feedback.
- **Alignment** refers to how well the instruction/intervention:
    - Targets the student's specific skill needs
    - Avoids focusing on skills the student has already mastered
    - Emphasizes relevant grade-level standards.

- **Attention to transfer** refers to how well the instruction/intervention is designed to help students apply learned skills to different contexts, as well as how it supports recognizing connections between mastered and related skills to promote meaningful generalization.
- **Comprehensiveness** refers to how many principles of explicit instruction are included.
- **Behavioral support** refers to how much the instruction/intervention includes:
    - Self-regulation and executive function elements
    - Behavioral strategies to reduce unproductive behavior.
- **Individualization** refers to the validated, data-based process for differentiating instruction and personalizing intervention over time to systematically adjust to the student's needs.

Watch this brief video, created in partnership by Rutgers University and the NJDOE through the NJTSS-ER project, titled Elements of Effective Intervention to learn more.

Delivering evidence-based early literacy skills and reading instruction and intensifying intervention support in alignment with the specific skill needs of students is essential for ensuring effective, comprehensive, and differentiated instructional practice.

Key Features of Effective Implementation

Over the past several decades, substantial efforts have been made to research and enhance evidence-based reading instruction (Foorman et al., 2016; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Shanahan et al., 2010; U.S. Congress, 2002, 2015). However, the successful implementation of these practices in schools has remained inconsistent. Consequently, students who struggle the most with reading have not fully benefited from instruction that research has found to be effective.

Implementing evidence-based early literacy skill development and reading instruction and intervention relies on data-driven decision making and requires specialized expertise in areas for which many educators may not have received training. While research has outlined essential elements for effective practice—including the use of research-aligned teaching strategies; the administration and analysis of screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring assessments; and the adaptation of interventions based on students' response to intervention (Gersten et al., 2008; Pullen & Kennedy, 2018)—professional development in these areas is often insufficient (Clemens et al, 2016; Glover & Vaughn, 2010; Pullen & Kennedy, 2018). For additional information, refer to the sections below: Establishing a District Universal Screening Process and Connection to the New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS)

The *New Jersey Student Learning Standards for English Language Arts* (NJSLS-ELA) outlines the essential skills students must acquire to build a strong literacy foundation. The sequence of instruction from preschool through grade three should be designed to facilitate cumulative skill development with clearly defined expectations. The NJSLS-ELA articulates learning goals and grade-level expectations that support cumulative skill development in key areas: phonological

and phonemic awareness; phonics, word recognition and morphology; reading fluency; vocabulary acquisition and use; and comprehension. These standards clearly outline what students are expected to learn at each grade level, emphasizing the need for foundational skills in early grades to ensure proficient reading with comprehension.

Evidence-based, appropriately sequenced instruction begins with phonemic awareness, phonics, and listening and language comprehension skills in preschool, kindergarten and first grade. As students master these skills, instruction transitions to decoding, word analysis, fluency, and reading comprehension.

Watch this brief video, created in partnership by Rutgers University and the NJDOE through the NJTSS-ER project, titled Progression of Skill Focus Across Grades to learn more.

These components of evidence-based literacy instruction align with the NJSLS-ELA vision statements. Effective instructional practices must provide students with explicit, systematic, and cumulative skill development in both word recognition and language comprehension. This ensures students can engage with complex texts, develop critical thinking skills, and communicate effectively. Foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, and sight word recognition support automatic word recognition, allowing students to read more sophisticated texts with fluency. At the same time, instruction must build students' background knowledge, vocabulary, and language comprehension, equipping them with the cognitive tools to analyze texts, engage in meaningful discussions, and apply their learning across contexts.

By integrating these evidence-based literacy practices into Tier 1 core reading instruction, educators ensure that all students develop the necessary skills for lifelong reading, writing, and critical thinking, in alignment with New Jersey's commitment to fostering confident, capable, and engaged readers.

Connection to New Jersey Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS)

The New Jersey Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS) is an evidence-based framework for implementing supports and interventions to improve student achievement, based on the core components of the three-tier prevention logic of Response to Intervention (RTI). With a foundation of strong district and school leadership, a positive school culture and climate, and family and community engagement, NJTSS builds on Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) and provides schools with the structure needed to meet the academic, behavioral, health, enrichment and social/emotional needs of all students. Additionally, it is important to note that ESL and Bilingual services are part of Tier 1 instruction.

A framework for the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports for Early Reading (NJTSS-ER) has been established through a series of U.S Department of Education Personnel Development Grants via a partnership between Rutgers University and the NJDOE. The NJTSS-ER framework operationalizes the coordination of resources, assessments, instruction, and interventions across a school district to support students' reading skill development. Full integration of the framework creates a

continuous cycle of data-based instructional decision making that supports districts in using their local data to guide effective evidence-based literacy instruction.

The NJTSS-ER website provides free access to many useful resources and tools, including these comprehensive online training modules:

- NJTSS-ER Team-Based Early Prevention Model
- NJTSS-ER Assessment & Data-Based Decision Making
- NJTSS-ER Research-Based Priority Early Reading Skills
- NJTSS-ER Universal Screening
- NJTSS-ER Tier 1 Instruction
- NJTSS-ER Diagnostics
- NJTSS-ER Tier 2 and 3 Intervention and Progress Monitoring

Connection to Intervention and Referral Services and Dyslexia Screening Requirements

PL.2024, Chapter 52, requires Universal Literacy Screening to be administered twice per year in kindergarten through third grade. Building on the Department's Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) regulations (N.J.A.C. 6A:16-8), a universal screening process helps identify students who may be at risk for reading difficulties at an early stage and provides for a coordinated system for planning and delivering intervention. Screening data are also used in accordance with P.L. 2013, c. 210, which requires that students exhibiting one or more potential indicators of dyslexia or other reading disabilities be screened with an approved instrument no later than the completion of the first semester of second grade.

The new requirement to universally screen all students in kindergarten through grade three pursuant to PL.2024, c.52, reflects New Jersey's commitment to early intervention and literacy development for all students. The screening data serve as the initial step in identifying potential risk factors for reading disabilities, such as dyslexia. They guide critical decisions regarding further diagnostic assessments, intervention planning and implementation, and progress monitoring. Understanding how students respond to evidence-based literacy instruction and intervention is a key component of the identification process. For a comprehensive explanation of dyslexia requirements, refer to The New Jersey Dyslexia Handbook: A Guide to Early Literacy Development & Reading Struggles on the NJDOE webpage on Dyslexia.

Universal Screening

Overview

Data-driven decision making is crucial for supporting early reading development, with universal screening serving as a key component of effective Multi-Tiered System of Supports for Reading (MTSS-R). Early identification of reading difficulties enables educators to provide targeted interventions, preventing small gaps from becoming long-term challenges (Foorman et al., 2020; Gersten et al., 2008). Research indicates that 74% of struggling readers in third grade remain poor readers by ninth grade if their difficulties are not addressed (Francis et al, 1996; Solari et al., 2021). Early screening is preferred over reactive approaches because it informs adjustments to core reading instruction (tier I) and the implementation of targeted interventions (tiers 2 and 3), thus preventing cumulative academic deficits (Gaab & Petscher, 2022).

Systematic data review and decision making are essential for addressing students' needs effectively. Universal screening data, collected throughout the school year, guide instructional decisions at both the system and student levels. As part of best practice, it is important to examine data by groups to determine if student needs in every demographic are being met. Regular data review meetings help ensure a unified, district-wide approach to progress evaluation and timely adjustments. This process allows educators to assess whether core instruction is meeting the needs of most students and to identify those needing targeted interventions or diagnostic assessments.

A deeper understanding of universal screening can be gained through the one hour self-paced module NJTSS-ER Universal Screening.

Why It Matters

Early and systematic screening is crucial for identifying and addressing reading challenges before they become long-term issues. Universal screening helps determine if Tier 1 instruction is meeting the needs of most students and identifies those needing additional support to close skill gaps. Without timely intervention, struggling readers face increased risks of behavioral problems, school dropout, and potential involvement in the correctional system (Solari et al., 2021). Effective screening addresses individual learning needs, ensures educational equity, and prevents future difficulties. By using reliable measures of key reading skills—such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and oral reading fluency—universal screening enables early identification of students needing diagnostic assessments to plan for targeted intervention.

What Our Students Need

Universal screening empowers educators to make proactive, data-informed instructional decisions to improve literacy outcomes. Screening indicators found through research to be predictive of students' reading skill proficiency include measures of letter naming fluency, phonemic awareness, phonics/decoding, and oral reading fluency. Students' performance on these indicators in the early grades (K-3) can be used to predict the degree to which they may benefit from additional early reading support. This proactive approach can be used to inform immediate needs and align instructional strategies with students' developing skills (Gersten et al., 2008).

While the legislation, PL.2024, Chapter 52, requires Universal Literacy Screening to be administered twice per year in kindergarten through third grade, districts can consider an optional third administration during the school year. For example, a district could meet its statutory obligation by administering screenings at the beginning and middle of the school year, and perhaps implementing a third administration at the end of the year if circumstances allow. Screening at the beginning, middle, and end of the year, enables educators to efficiently appraise students' reading skill proficiency and the overall effectiveness of core instruction. For students in grades four through twelve scoring below grade level expectations, it is recommended to screen using grade level benchmarks. Screening protocols should continue for students in grades four through twelve who have demonstrated a need for intervention supports and progress monitoring in alignment with Intervention and Referral Service protocols.

Criteria for Selecting a Research-Based Universal Screening Assessment

It is important to select a universal screening tool that has been developed and validated for the purpose of screening. Extensive research over the past 30 years has identified key criteria for evaluating universal reading screening approaches.

Criterion 1 — Assessment of Research-based Priority Indicators

Research has been instrumental for identifying key indicators that are predictive of students' reading performance. A screening tool should collect data on all students for these key indicators at each benchmark within a school year is crucial for identifying early reading skill needs and preventing future reading difficulties (Gersten et al., 2008). Predictive indicators appropriate for assessment at each grade level are shown in the table below. For each respective grade level, screening should focus on the following priority indicators (see Table 1):

Table 1: Priority Indicators for Early Reading Universal Screening

Grade	Letter Naming Fluency	Phonetic Awareness	Phonics and Decoding	Oral Reading Fluency	Comprehension
K	✓	✓	✓		
1	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2			✓	✓	✓
3			✓	✓	✓
4+				✓	✓

Although universal screening assessments for phonemic awareness and phonics/decoding are typically not administered beyond first and third grade, respectively, some students may continue to experience difficulties in these areas. For this reason, it is important that additional diagnostic data be collected to determine specific skill needs for students scoring below benchmark on any screening assessment (e.g., it is important to collect additional diagnostic data to determine whether students in fourth grade have phonics/decoding skill difficulties contributing to below-benchmark oral reading fluency performance). For additional information, refer to the section below on *Using Screening Data to Inform Instruction and Intervention*.

While many universal screening tools include reading comprehension measures, such as retell tasks, these have historically not been strong predictors of reading proficiency in the early grades.

Some screening tools also assess oral language skills, providing valuable insights into students' language comprehension and other potential risk factors. For universal screening systems that do not include measures of oral language skills, a brief rating scale can serve as an efficient means of screening for potential oral language concerns (e.g., Developmental Language Disorder). Additional oral language assessments can be administered to students who are suspected of having oral language weaknesses (, see Bao et al., 2024). Data from these assessments can be used in consultation with a speech language pathologist to guide instructional decisions. The use of multiple assessment measures improves the accuracy of identifying students at risk for oral language and reading difficulties by assessing the relevant skills at the appropriate grade level (International Dyslexia Association, 2019).

Criterion 2 — Time Efficiency

A screening tool should be time-efficient, ensuring that assessments can be completed within a reasonable timeframe. If group-administered, the assessment should fit within a standard class period. If individually administered, it should take no more than 10 minutes per student. For example, a Phoneme Segmentation Fluency probe efficiently measures phonemic awareness by assessing a student's ability to segment sounds in words within one minute. Similarly, a Nonsense

Word Fluency probe evaluates phonics and decoding skills by measuring the number of correct letter sounds and whole pseudo-words a student reads in one minute.

Criterion 3 — Sufficiency of Items for Assessing Each Skill

The screening tool should include a sufficient number of items to effectively assess each skill area, ensuring reliable measurement of student proficiency. As an example, a Phoneme Segmentation Fluency assessment, for which students are given a full minute to segment sounds for a list of orally read words containing a wide range of phonemes, can provide sufficient opportunities for students to demonstrate phonemic awareness skills. Similarly, a Nonsense Word Fluency probe with a wide range of letter-sound combinations and whole pseudo-words can be used to reliably assess phonics and decoding skills. In contrast, assessment probes that measure skills with a very limited number of items (e.g., a handful of multiple-choice items) may not reliably capture a full picture of student proficiency in a skill area.

Criterion 4 — Requirement of Oral Responses from Students

The screening tool should require students to produce oral responses. Oral production allows educators to directly evaluate a student's ability to manipulate sounds and apply letter-sound knowledge in real time. For example, a Phoneme Segmentation Fluency probe assesses phonemic awareness by requiring students to verbally segment sounds in words. Similarly, a Nonsense Word Fluency probe evaluates phonics and decoding skills by having students orally produce letter sounds and read whole words aloud. For computer-administered screening requiring students to respond to multiple choice options, it is recommended that a test administrator also conduct assessments requiring oral responses to obtain a better understanding of all students' abilities to manipulate sounds and apply letter-sound knowledge.

Criterion 5 — Ease of Administration and Scoring

A screening tool should be easy to administer and score, ensuring efficiency and consistency in evaluating student performance. Administration procedures should be straightforward, requiring minimal training for educators. Scoring should be clear and objective, allowing for quick interpretation of results. For example, a Phoneme Segmentation Fluency probe typically involves simply counting the number of correctly segmented sounds, while a Nonsense Word Fluency probe requires recording the number of correct letter sounds and whole pseudo-words read within a minute. Alternate approaches that require administrators to analyze multiple aspects of students' responses are much more difficult for administrators to implement reliably.

Criterion 6 — Use of Standardized Scoring Rules

Screening tools should employ standardized scoring rules to ensure consistency, reliability, and objectivity in evaluating student performance. Clear, uniform scoring guidelines allow educators to accurately interpret results and compare student progress over time. For example, guidelines should be clear on how to handle instances when a student hesitates for too long or self-corrects after an initial error.

Criterion 7 — Use of Common Skills Criteria for Benchmark Attainment

Screening tools should assess students against common skills criteria rather than individualized reading levels or categories of reading behaviors to ensure consistent and rigorous expectations. Benchmark assessments must apply uniform cut scores at each grade level within a given time period, allowing for equitable evaluation of student progress. Consistent scoring thresholds for benchmark attainment ensures that all students are held to the same expectations for demonstrating proficiency.

Criterion 8 — Availability of Companion Progress Monitoring Tool

It is also important that companion progress monitoring tools with multiple forms be available to track growth for students receiving intervention who scored below screening benchmark expectations. Use of these companion tools is necessary to gauge students' response to intervention.

Criterion 9 — Evidence of Reliability and Validity

A screening tool must be supported by research demonstrating its reliability (consistency) and validity (accuracy) in assessing early reading skills. This evidence is important for ensuring that the assessments measure student performance as intended. Coefficients for reliability and validity range in value between 0 and 1. Typically, a value of 0.8 or greater is considered highly reliable and valid (Glover & Albers, 2007).

Criterion 10 — Evidence of Accuracy in Predicting Reading Proficiency

To prevent and address reading difficulties early, it is crucial that screening tools have evidence based support demonstrating their accuracy in predicting students' risk status and future reading proficiency (Glover & Albers, 2007). Developers of screening tools should report the classification accuracy of their assessments by comparing the initial screening results to later reading performance. Key indices of classification accuracy include:

- **Sensitivity:** The proportion or percent of students who are actually at risk that are correctly identified by the screening tool. High sensitivity ensures that most students who need additional support are identified early.
- **Specificity:** The proportion or percent of students who are not at risk that are correctly identified as not needing additional support. High specificity minimizes the risk of misidentifying students as needing extra help when they do not.
- **Total Diagnostic Accuracy:** The proportion or percent of both true positives (students correctly identified as at risk) and true negatives (students correctly identified as not at risk) relative to the total number of students. This metric reflects the overall accuracy of the screening tool in correctly identifying students' risk status.

Each of these indices is reported as a percentage of students correctly classified. Although values of 80% and above are typically considered to be acceptable, no universal screeners exceed this threshold on all indices for students at each grade level at all points in time. Some universal screeners may deliberately sacrifice specificity for sensitivity, to avoid under-identifying students at risk (Glover & Albers, 2007).

Watch this brief video, created in partnership by Rutgers University and the NJDOE through the NJTSS-ER project, titled Selecting an Effective Universal Screening Assessment to learn more. See the Universal Screening Quality Evaluation Worksheet in Appendix A to support school districts in selecting an effective universal screening tool.

Considerations for a Full Range of Learners

Universal screening assessments are required by law to be administered to all students, including students receiving special education services and multilingual learners. It is important to consider a full range of learners when selecting a universal screening assessment. School districts should consider the following.

Assess Students Receiving Special Education for Potential Reading Difficulties

Educators should assess students receiving special education services for potential reading difficulties as early as possible, regardless of the student's disability category. Delaying assessment could result in unnecessary delays in providing evidence-based interventions. It is essential that staff responsible for developing district guidelines for universal screening, as well as those administering these assessments, have a strong understanding of both foundational literacy skills and the unique needs related to students' disabilities. When selecting and administering universal screening assessments for students receiving special education services, a list of approved assessment accommodations, typically provided in the screening tool's scoring guide, should be considered. These accommodations should only be used when it is unlikely that accurate measurement of a student's skills can take place without them and/or when accommodations are specified in a student's 504 plan or Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Consult with Child Study Team Members

To determine appropriate accommodations/modifications (e.g., the use of adaptive tools, visual supports, and observation-based assessments) and decision making criteria for students with significant cognitive and low incidence disabilities (e.g., blind/visually impaired, deaf/hard of hearing, speech and language impairment/nonverbal), consult with Child Study Team members, speech-language pathologists, and/or teachers of the deaf/hard of hearing familiar with the students' specific needs. For further details, see the Students with Disabilities Screening Checklists in Appendix B.1, Appendix B.2, and Appendix B.3.

Assess Multilingual Learners for Potential Difficulties

For multilingual learners (MLs) acquiring reading skills in English, educators should assess potential difficulties as early as possible, without waiting for full development of their English proficiency. Postponing assessment could result in unnecessary delays in intervention. It is essential that staff responsible for developing district screening guidelines and/or for administering screening assessments have a strong understanding of both foundational literacy skills and the unique needs of MLs as well as bidialectal speakers of English. It is important to select screening approaches that allow for assessment administration in both the student's home language and English and that include scoring guidance for language variation (such as a phoneme pronunciation guide) to avoid penalizing students for dialect, accent, or articulation differences. For further details, see the Multilingual Learners Screening Checklist in Appendix C.

Establishing a District Universal Screening Process

Building a Leadership Team

Establishing effective universal screening processes should be a coordinated effort by leadership teams (Mincu, 2022; Nellis, 2012). These teams, often responsible for MTSS-R implementation, play a critical role in aligning screening practices and data-driven decisions across schools and districts, ensuring adequate resources, and promoting professional development to build staff confidence (Duda & Wilson, 2018). Many districts already have leadership teams in place and may need to assess their composition to ensure inclusivity across roles. A well-structured team should represent the district and school community, incorporating diverse perspectives, including those from special populations such as multilingual learners and students with disabilities (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016; Freeman et al., 2015).

Leadership teams should include administrators with decision-making authority, such as superintendents and directors of curriculum and special services, alongside individuals with expertise in screening and data use. Teams must be large enough to ensure cross-departmental collaboration and sufficient decision-making power but not so large that efficiency is compromised (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016; New Jersey Tiered System of Supports for Early Reading, 2024). Clearly defining roles and responsibilities within the team is essential, aligning tasks with members' expertise, authority, and availability. District size should also be considered, as it impacts role distribution and capacity. While it is not required to create a leadership team, it is encouraged as a strategy for implementation to be as effective as possible. Table2 outlines key roles necessary to facilitate universal screening and data-driven decision-making (New Jersey Tiered System of Supports for Early Reading, 2024).

Table 2: Building a Strong Leadership Team

Systems Change Leader	Facilitator	Content Experts
Has authority and capacity to: • Engage school personnel in enacting screening and data-driven instruction/intervention • Allocate resources to enable implementation • Promote professional development • Create opportunities/structures that enable planning and implementation to take place	Has authority and capacity to: • Identify professional development needs and facilitate opportunities for training in screening and data-driven instruction/intervention • Develop and execute action plans to guide implementation of screening and data-driven decisions • Facilitate the daily involvement of school personnel (e.g., teachers, interventions, data personnel)	Have expertise to inform decisions/implementation pertaining to: • The function and purpose of early reading assessments • The analysis of data to identify student needs • The provision of effective reading instruction/ intervention practices
Examples: • Assistant Superintendent • Director of Curriculum • English Language Arts Supervisor	**Examples:** • English Language Arts Supervisor • Instructional Coach • Reading Specialist	**Examples:** • Director of Curriculum • English Language Arts Supervisor • Instructional Coach • Reading Specialist • Classroom Teacher • Interventionist • Teacher of Multilingual Learners • Special Education Director/Teacher

Watch this brief video, created in partnership by Rutgers University and the NJDOE through the NJTSS-ER project, titled Creating a NJTSS-ER Leadership Team to learn more.

Preparing for Universal Screening

It is important to establish clear processes, schedules, and training to ensure that screening administration and data-based decision making are consistent and accurate across the district or school.

Operationalizing and Scheduling Screening and Data-Based Decision Making

It is important to operationalize processes, procedures, and schedules for screening administration, scoring, and data-based decision making. This includes specifying procedures and timetables for:

(a) Preparing assessment materials

(b) Administering assessments in appropriate locations to students across grade levels

(c) Scoring assessments and generating data reports

(d) Conducting data review meetings

(e) Planning for and executing data-driven adjustments to core instruction

(f) Administering and interpreting follow-up diagnostic assessments

(g) Using data to group and assign students to appropriate interventions

Providing Training

To help ensure that the administration and use of universal screening data is appropriate, it is important for personnel to receive sufficient training. This includes systematically scheduling and providing professional development focused on administration and scoring and on data interpretation for those making data-driven instructional decisions.

Establishing Plans for Monitoring Screening

In addition to facilitating training and implementation of screening, it is important to develop and enact a plan for monitoring adherence to universal screening assessment processes and procedures. This includes creating and managing procedures for conducting checks to ensure that implementation aligns with assessment guidelines and retraining personnel when needed to improve implementation.

Watch this brief video, created in partnership by Rutgers University and the NJDOE through the NJTSS-ER project, titled Monitoring Universal Screening Implementation Fidelity to learn more.

Using Screening Data to Inform Instruction and Intervention

It is important that screening data be used to:

(a) Determine areas in which Tier 1 core instruction needs to be adjusted to meet the majority of students' needs

(b) Identify which students may benefit from additional intervention consistent with the district's Interventional and Referral Services process (Gersten et al., 2008)

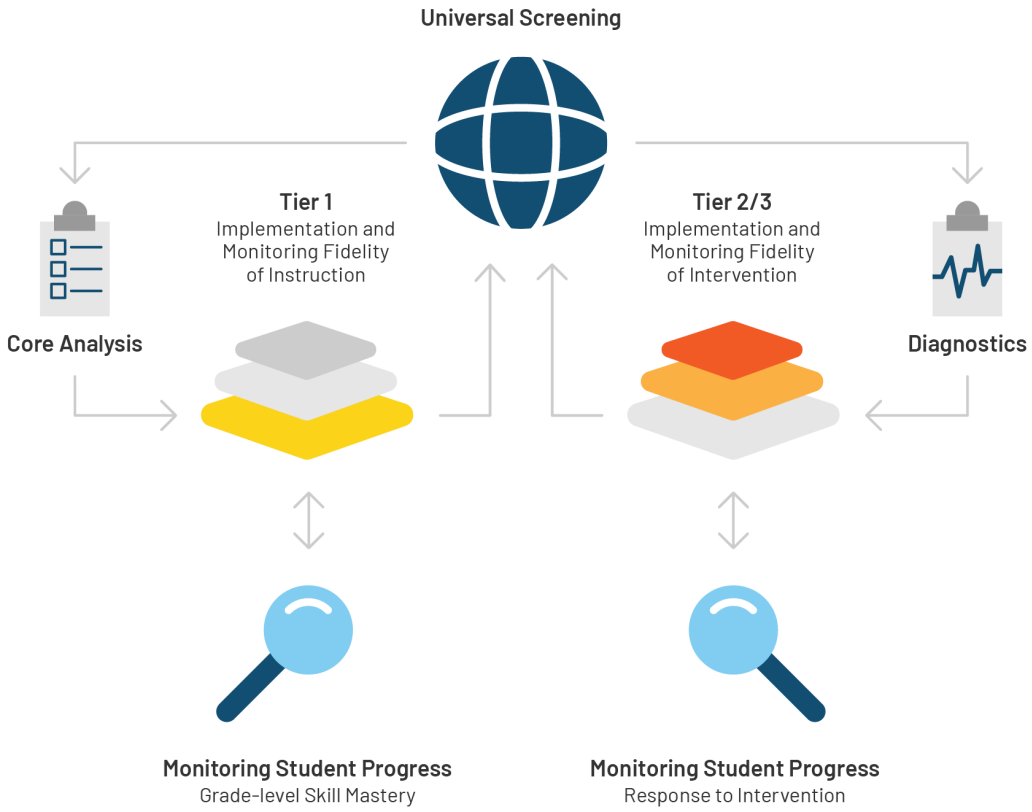
Using Screening Data to Guide Tier 1 Core Instruction

District/school personnel should review screening data within and across grade levels and schools to determine areas to consider for adjustments to Tier 1 core instruction. When screening data indicate that a large proportion of students within or across classrooms (e.g., greater than 20%) are scoring below benchmark on universal screening indicators, it is important to make adjustments to Tier 1 core instruction to ensure that students have the skills needed to read proficiently. Districts and schools can use freely available core instruction analysis tools (e.g., NJTSS-ER Core Instruction Analysis Tool) to analyze the degree to which curricula and instruction in areas of need identified through screening (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, comprehension) align to practices found through research to be effective at promoting students' acquisition of reading skills.

Using Screening Data to Guide Diagnostic Assessment & Tier 2 and 3 Intervention Planning

In addition to informing adjustments to Tier 1 core instruction, screening data are also useful for guiding decisions about student intervention when Tier 1 is insufficient for meeting their learning needs. It is important to administer follow-up diagnostic assessments (e.g., the Quick Phonics Screener or Core Phonics Survey) to students scoring below benchmark on universal screening assessments to determine their specific skill needs. Students with similar skill needs can then be grouped together for targeted Tier 2 or intensive Tier 3 interventions that address these specific areas of need (Hall, 2018).

Figure 2: Data-Informed Instruction



Text Version: Data-Informed Instruction

For more information on selecting diagnostic assessments, watch NJTSS-ER Selecting Effective Diagnostic Assessments, created in partnership by Rutgers University and the NJDOE through the NJTSS-ER project, to learn more.

When a large proportion of students require intervention support, districts may consider the use of class-wide intervention as a short-term solution to address common skill needs and close skill gaps as quickly as possible. Class-wide interventions involve modifying Tier 1 core instruction through the utilization of existing review lessons, supplements, and/or incorporating new instructional material to address targeted skills. It is crucial to understand that class-wide intervention is a short-term solution and is not a substitute for high quality Tier 1 instruction that meets the needs of a majority of learners. It is important to continue analyzing and adjusting core instruction so that Tier 1 core instruction can meet the majority of student's needs, reducing the number of students requiring Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention support over time.

Watch this brief video, created in partnership by Rutgers University and the NJDOE through the NJTSS-ER project, titled Universal Screening: A Case Study to learn more. There are free resources and training to support integration of diagnostics and Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention and progress monitoring available on the NJTSS-ER website.

Frequent Monitoring of Progress of Students Receiving Intervention

For students receiving intervention, it is important to regularly (weekly/bi-weekly) monitor their progress using both skill-specific mastery assessments and general outcome measures. The collected data are regularly analyzed alongside implementation fidelity data to assess whether students are making sufficient progress toward goals.

Monitor Students' Response to Intervention

When determining students' response to intervention, data review teams conduct a thorough analysis of both the students' mastery of specific skills and their rate of improvement on general outcome measures.

Figure 3: Review of Universal Screening Data

Text Version: Review of Universal Screening Data

Adequate and Sustained Progress

If the student makes adequate and sustained progress, the team may discuss the possibility of fading intervention. This process may include developing an exit plan that gradually reduces supplemental support while ensuring that the student maintains or exceeds grade-level expectations. Intervention should be continued until students have attained scores indicating expected grade-level benchmark performance and show evidence of maintaining a consistent rate of improvement that will enable them to continue to meet grade-level benchmark expectations over time.

Insufficient Progress Due to Implementation

If students are not making sufficient progress, data regarding fidelity of implementation should be reviewed to determine whether lack of progress could be attributed to inadequate implementation. If so, the team may decide to provide coaching or additional training for the interventionist rather than modify the intervention plan. In this way, the team addresses fidelity concerns through problem-solving. However, if fidelity is not an issue and students are still not progressing adequately, the team may adjust the intervention plan to better align with the student's skill needs. This might involve increasing the intensity or dosage of the intervention to better facilitate skill growth.

Insufficient Skill Mastery

If data show insufficient skill mastery and a lack of improvement over time, despite proper implementation, the data review team may recommend intensifying the intervention. Additionally, if the student's rate of improvement is slow or poor, a referral to the Child Study Team may be warranted to further evaluate for a reading disability such as dyslexia. These assessments can provide additional insights into trends in the student's skill development that indicate a disability or cognitive skills which may be impacting their progress. The information gathered can help refine the Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions to better meet the student's needs, whether for general education or special education planning purposes.

Students' Response to Intervention

This process of determining students' response to intervention allows for a student's rate of improvement to be utilized in the early identification of reading disabilities like dyslexia. The data analysis process is used to screen for trends that would indicate the possibility of an underlying learning disability. Universal screening data will indicate the student's potential risk status, diagnostic data will reveal the patterns in the student's skill mastery that are characteristic of difficulties related to dyslexia or other reading disorders, and progress monitoring data will inform on the student's overall response to evidence-based instruction and intervention.

It is important to acknowledge that a referral to the school district's child study team can be made at any point in this process if a disability is suspected. However, an early identification process that utilizes the student's achievement and instructional response data, within a framework like NJTSS-ER is more adaptive. This approach, which also considers implementation fidelity data, focuses on prevention and treatment through its iterative, tiered approach (Miciak & Fletcher, 2020).

For a comprehensive explanation of early dyslexia identification, refer to The New Jersey Dyslexia Handbook: A Guide to Early Literacy Development & Reading Struggles on the NJDOE webpage on Dyslexia.

Communicating with Families

Effective communication with families is crucial for supporting students' reading development and fostering a collaborative approach to multi-tiered student support. Keeping families informed about their child's progress promotes transparency, encourages engagement, and strengthens partnerships between educators and caregivers. To ensure this collaboration, P.L.2024, c.52 requires that, within 30 days of concluding screening, parents or guardians must receive written notification detailing their child's literacy screening score and how it compares to grade-level norms. The notification must also include information about available intervention and referral services designed to support the student's reading development. This might include, but need not be limited to, reading intervention programs offered by the district to help students achieve grade-level reading proficiency. Communication should be presented in a family-friendly manner, using accessible language and, when necessary, translated into the family's preferred language to ensure understanding and engagement in the student's literacy progress. Appendix D.1 and Appendix D.2 include example letters that can be adapted by districts.

Table 3: Recommended Practices for Family Communication

Do	Do Not
• Develop a communication plan for informing families about universal literacy screenings. • Provide all communications in the languages preferred by families. • Use language that is easy to understand in all communications. • Inform families about the district's approaches to instruction and assessment before sharing student results. • Clearly explain the meaning of scores in family reports. • Consider language development when communicating results for multilingual learners. • Solicit feedback from families to enhance communication.	• Overuse technical or specialized terminology. • Include complex charts or statistics that may be difficult to interpret. • Present numerical scores without offering sufficient context or clarification. • Use alarming terms such as "failing" or "deficit." • Refer to students with labels like "tier 2 kids" or "at-risk students."

Adapted from the 2023 Massachusetts DESE Early Literacy Screening Guidance

Beyond notification, meaningful family engagement should be a priority, as informed and involved caregivers play a vital role in children's literacy development. The New Jersey Tiered System of Support for Early Reading (NJTSS-ER) framework emphasizes family involvement in assessment and data-based decision making, reading instruction, and intervention. Through a partnership between the SPAN Parent Advocacy Network and the NJDOE, families have access to free resources and training available on the SPAN website to support their child's reading success.

Conclusion

By providing districts with clear, evidence-based guidance, the NJDOE aims to strengthen early literacy models that proactively identify skill gaps, deliver timely interventions, and support all students in developing a strong foundation for literacy proficiency. This framework also reinforces the alignment between literacy instruction and broader educational initiatives, including the New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS), dyslexia legislation, and the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS), promoting a cohesive, research-driven approach to student success. Moving forward, the NJDOE encourages school districts to leverage this framework to enhance their literacy programs, engage in ongoing professional development, and collaborate with families to foster students' literacy growth.

For updates—including the release of Part Two, which will focus on high-quality instructional materials, and the release of professional development supports—please visit the NJDOE's Learning Equity and Academic Recovery webpage.

Glossary

Alignment

In the context of intensifying intervention, how well the instruction/intervention:

a. Targets the student's specific skill needs

b. Avoids focusing on skills the student has already mastered

c. Emphasizes relevant grade-level standards

(Fuchs, Fuchs, & Malone, 2017)

Attention to Transfer

In the context of intensifying intervention, how well the instruction/intervention is designed to help students apply learned skills to different contexts, as well as how it supports recognizing connections between mastered and related skills to promote meaningful generalization (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Malone, 2017).

Background Knowledge

The prior knowledge, including facts, concepts, beliefs, and experiences, that helps readers make inferences and connect new information with what they already know

Behavioral support

In the context of intensifying intervention, how much the instruction/intervention includes:

a. Self-regulation and executive function elements

b. Behavioral strategies to reduce unproductive behavior

(Fuchs, Fuchs, & Malone, 2017)

Complex Text

A text with characteristics that increase the level of difficulty in reading and comprehending it. Text complexity is determined by quantitative measures (such as word length, sentence structure, and cohesion), qualitative measures (including depth of meaning, text organization, and language clarity), and reader and task considerations (such as the reader's background knowledge, motivation, and purpose for reading).

Comprehension

The ability to understand, interpret, and make sense of information or concepts presented in written or spoken form.

Comprehensiveness

In the context of intensifying intervention, how many principles of explicit instruction are included (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Malone, 2017).

Decoding

A process of using phoneme-grapheme correspondences to sound out words or nonsense words.

Diagnostic Assessment

The process of administering skill inventories or surveys to plan for students' reading intervention. After universal screening, one or more diagnostic tools are selected to further measure students' early reading skill needs. These tools are typically untimed measures that can be delivered individually or whole group (e.g., phonics inventory, spelling diagnostic survey).

Dosage

In the context of intensifying intervention, the student group size, instruction/intervention session duration, and weekly session frequency, all of which determine the total number of opportunities for students to respond and receive corrective feedback (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Malone, 2017).

Dyslexia

A specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge (N.J.A.C. 6A:14-1.3).

Encoding

A process of using phoneme-grapheme correspondences to spell words.

Evidence-Based Literacy Practices

Instructional methods and strategies for teaching reading and writing that are supported by rigorous research and data, demonstrating their efficacy and/or effectiveness under controlled conditions in well-conducted studies.

Explicit Instruction

A direct approach to instruction that not only includes clear teacher-led explanations and demonstrations but also emphasizes active student engagement, practice, and immediate corrective feedback. It's designed to make the learning process transparent, often incorporating an "I do, we do, you do" gradual release of responsibility model. The National Reading Panel (2000) recommended explicit, systematic instruction for teaching reading.

Fidelity

The degree to which a program, intervention, or strategy is delivered as intended by its design. It ensures that the components and procedures outlined are consistently followed and applied correctly, without significant modifications or deviations.

Grapheme

The smallest unit of written language that represents a sound (phoneme) in a particular language. It can be a single letter or a letter combination that represents a single phoneme (e.g., b for the /b/ in bat, oa for the /ō/ in boat).

Individualization

In the context of intensifying intervention, the validated, data-based process for differentiating instruction and personalizing intervention over time to systematically adjust to the student's needs (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Malone, 2017).

Intervention and Referral Services

An interdisciplinary team of professionals within the school environment who come together throughout the school year to formulate coordinated services and team delivery systems to address the full range of student learning, behavior, social, and health problems in the general education program as well as for students determined to be in need of special education programs and services (N.J.A.C 6A:16-8.1-2).

Language Comprehension

The ability to interpret both literal and implied meanings from spoken language. It involves synthesizing and organizing information from various language systems to construct meaning.

Language Structure

The underlying rules and systems that govern how language is organized, both at the level of semantics (meaning-based relationships between words and phrases) and syntax (sentence structure, word order, and grammar–the relationships between different parts of speech).

Letter Naming Fluency

The ability to quickly and accurately recognize and name letters in the alphabet. It is a common measure included in universal screening assessments.

Literacy Knowledge

The awareness of text organization, print concepts (such letters, words, punctuation), and the specific strategies needed for understanding different genres of text.

Morphology

The system of meaningful units and word formation patterns within a language, including prefixes, suffixes, and/or root words.

Multilingual Learner

Students with a primary language other than English who are in the process of developing proficiency in English.

New Jersey Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS)

New Jersey's framework of supports and interventions to improve student achievement, based on the core components of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and the three tier prevention logic of Response to Intervention.

Onset-rime

The two main parts of a syllable in spoken language. Onset is the initial consonant or consonant cluster of a syllable (e.g., in cat, the onset is /k/; in spot, the onset is /sp/). Rime is the vowel and any following consonants in the syllable (e.g., in cat, the rime is /ăt/; in spot, the rime is /ŏt/).

Oral Language

A system of communication that utilizes spoken words to convey meaning. It encompasses both receptive (listening) and expressive (speaking) skills.

Oral Reading Fluency

The ability to read a text aloud with accuracy, automaticity, and appropriate expression. It is a common measure included in universal screening assessments that specifically provides data on word reading accuracy and automaticity.

Orthographic Mapping

The mental process that links a word's orthographic (written) form to its phonological (spoken) form. This mapping helps readers create a stable memory of spelling patterns, which is essential for building automatic word recognition skills.

Orthographic Processing

The ability to form, store, and retrieve accurate representations of written words, including letter sequences and spelling patterns, from memory.

Phoneme

The smallest, individual speech sound in a spoken word with a phonetic distinction significant enough to make a word distinguishable in meaning from another word in a language (e.g., the /h/ in house versus the /m/ in mouse).

Phoneme-Grapheme Correspondences

Associations of the phonemes (speech sounds) heard in spoken words with the graphemes (letters and letter combinations) seen in printed or written words.

Phonemic Awareness

The awareness of the individual speech sounds in spoken words and the ability to consciously manipulate those phonemes.

Phonics

A method of teaching reading and spelling that emphasizes the relationship between graphemes and their corresponding phonemes. It involves helping students understand how letters or combinations of letters represent the sounds in spoken words. Phonics instruction focuses on teaching students to decode (sound out) and encode (spell) words by recognizing these phoneme-grapheme correspondences.

Phonological Awareness

The ability to consciously reflect on and manipulate phonological units of spoken words such as rhymes, syllables, and phonemes. Phonological awareness consists of phonological sensitivity and phonemic awareness.

Phonological Processing

The ability to perceive, understand, and use the sound structures of words. This ability encompasses a set of processes for perceiving, interpreting, storing, recalling, and generating the speech sounds of a language and relates to many of the literacy-based tasks that students are asked to complete in the classroom.

Progress Monitoring

A systematic process of tracking student growth using multiple-form assessment tools, particularly for students receiving intervention who scored below screening benchmark expectations. These tools help measure students' response to intervention and inform instructional adjustments as needed.

Reading Comprehension

The ability to extract and construct literal and inferred meaning from written text.

Research-Based Literacy Practices

Instructional methods and strategies for teaching reading and writing that are grounded in the best available research, demonstrating their potential effectiveness in typical school environments when implemented with fidelity.

Scarborough's Reading Rope

A theoretical model that illustrates the complex process of skilled reading. It depicts how multiple interconnected skill strands of word recognition and language comprehension combine and strengthen over time to support fluent and effective comprehension of text.

Semantics

The meaning of and relationship between the words within sentences in a language.

Sensitivity

In the context of universal screening, the percentage of students who are truly at risk that are correctly identified by the screening tool. High sensitivity ensures that most students who need additional support are identified early, reducing the chances of overlooking those in need of support.

Sight Recognition

The ability to instantly and effortlessly recognize and read familiar words.

Simple View of Reading

A theoretical and empirically-validated model that explains reading comprehension as the product of two essential components: word recognition and language comprehension. According to this model, both skills are necessary for proficient reading, and deficits in either area can hinder overall reading comprehension.

Specificity

In the context of universal screening, the percentage of students who are not at risk that are correctly identified as not needing additional support. High specificity minimizes the risk of mistakenly identifying students as needing extra support when they do not.

Strength

In the context of intensifying intervention, the efficacy of the instruction or intervention, or its likelihood of producing meaningful positive outcomes for students with few adjustments. It is often quantified in effect sizes (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Malone, 2017).

Syllable

A unit of sound in a word that typically consists of a vowel sound (which may be accompanied by consonant sounds) and is spoken as a single, uninterrupted segment.

Syntax

The order and grammatical arrangement of words within sentences in a language.

Systematic Instruction

A structured approach to teaching that follows a carefully organized sequence, ensuring content is delivered in a logical, step-by-step manner. It emphasizes clear progression from simple concepts to more complex concepts, with deliberate planning and consistency in teaching methods. This approach often includes ongoing assessment to monitor student progress and adjust instruction as needed. The National Reading Panel (2000) recommended systematic, explicit instruction for teaching reading.

Tier 1

Research-based core instruction including both whole-group lessons and differentiated small-group supports aligned with the New Jersey Student Learning Standards, using grade-level materials provided to all students in general education, bilingual, and ESL classrooms, regardless of performance level. As the primary prevention for reading and writing difficulties, it maximizes learning through direct modeling and support, and access to grade-level texts and tasks.

Tier 2

Targeted intervention providing additional evidence-based support beyond Tier 1 for students performing below benchmark expectations on universal screening. Recommended for small groups of 3 to 5 students, intervention occurs 3 to 5 days per week and is provided by interventionists, reading specialists, or classroom teachers. Instruction focuses on skill development and increases in intensity, frequency, and duration based on ongoing progress monitoring. Diagnostic assessments help determine intervention foci, with adjustments made based on individual student data.

Tier 3

Intensive intervention providing evidence-based support beyond Tier 2 for students performing significantly below benchmark expectations on universal screening or for whom Tier 2 interventions are insufficient. Recommended for small groups of 2 to 3 students or individual students, these interventions occur more frequently and are provided by interventionists, reading specialists, or classroom teachers. Instruction focuses on skill development and increases in intensity, frequency, and duration based on ongoing progress monitoring. Diagnostic assessments help determine intervention foci, with adjustments made based on individual student data.

Total Diagnostic Accuracy

In the context of universal screening, the metric that reflects the overall accuracy of the screening tool in correctly identifying students' risk status.

Translanguaging

Utilizing all linguistic and cognitive resources, including one's home language, to comprehend academic content presented in a new language that one is beginning to acquire.

Universal Screening

An assessment process conducted to gather information about a student's overall academic skills and to identify or predict the risk of difficulties in priority skill areas. This process helps inform core instruction and determine if further diagnostic assessment is necessary to guide targeted intervention.

Verbal Reasoning

The ability to use language to reason, which helps readers make inferences, understand metaphors, sequence information, and predict outcomes.

Vocabulary

The knowledge of word meanings that impacts readers ability to comprehend language, including breadth (number of words known), depth (understanding of words in context), and precision (accurate use of words).

Word Recognition

The ability to recognize printed words accurately and quickly, allowing efficient access to stored word meanings without conscious effort.

Written Language

A system of communication that utilizes text to convey meaning. It encompasses both receptive skills (reading) and expressive skills (writing).

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Appendix A: Universal Literacy Screening Criteria

Universal Literacy Screening Quality Evaluation Worksheet

The criteria listed below outline the minimum requirements to meet New Jersey's standards for an appropriate Universal Literacy Screening tool, in accordance with P.L. 2024 c. 52. Use the worksheet to evaluate whether the tool meets each criterion. Please refer to the technical manual provided by the screening tool vendor to confirm the information required for this evaluation.

Some screening tools also assess oral language skills, providing valuable insights into students' language comprehension and other potential risk factors. For universal screening systems that do not include measures of oral language skills, a brief rating scale can serve as an efficient means of screening for potential oral language concerns (e.g., Developmental Language Disorder). Additional oral language assessments can be administered to students who are suspected of having oral language weaknesses (for additional information on oral language screening tools, see Bao et al., 2024).

Criterion 1: Assessment of Research-based Predictive Indicators

When evaluating a tool, it must assess the following skill areas at each grade level, as indicated by check boxes. Check the box if the tool meets the criterion.

Grade	Letter Naming Fluency	Phonetic Awareness	Phonics and Decoding	Oral Reading Fluency	Comprehension
K	☐	☐	☐	n/a	n/a
1	☐	☐	☐	☐	n/a
2	n/a	n/a	☐	☐	☐
3	n/a	n/a	☐	☐	☐
4+	n/a	n/a	n/a	☐	☐

Criterion 2–10

Review the following criteria. For each criterion, indicate Yes or No and provide evidence.

Criterion	Yes	No	Findings/Decisions
2. Time efficiency (less than 10 minutes)	☐	☐	
3. Sufficiency of items for assessing each skill	☐	☐	
4. Requirement of oral responses from students' letter/sound, word reading, and reading connected text	☐	☐	
5. Ease of administration and scoring	☐	☐	
6. Use of standardized scoring rules	☐	☐	
7. Use of common skills criteria for benchmark attainment	☐	☐	
8. Availability of companion progress monitoring tools	☐	☐	
9. Evidence of reliability and validity	☐	☐	
10. Evidence of accuracy in predicting reading proficiency	☐	☐	
Considerations for diverse learners: e.g., lists of approved accommodations, scoring guidance for language variation, assessment measures in other languages	☐	☐	

The Universal Literacy Screening Quality Evaluation Worksheet was developed in collaboration with Rutgers University through a State Personnel Development Grant sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs. It reflects research, expert input, and stakeholder feedback from the Working Group on Student Literacy to support effective instruction and intervention for a full range of learners.

Appendix B.1: School District Universal Literacy Screening Checklist for Students with Severe Intellectual Disabilities

The Universal Literacy Screening Checklist for Students with Severe Intellectual Disabilities (SID) is designed to help educators take a structured and individualized approach to literacy screening, instruction, and intervention. By combining universal literacy screening practices with evidence-based instruction and interventions, it takes into account the unique learning needs of students with SID, ensuring that assessment and instructional practices are both accessible and appropriate. The checklist emphasizes cultural and linguistic responsiveness, providing the foundation for equitable literacy practices that support all learners, particularly those with severe intellectual challenges.

It is essential for educators to assess students with SID for potential reading difficulties as early as possible. Early literacy assessments ensure that support is provided promptly, helping to close skill gaps. Delaying assessments could lead to unnecessary delays in intervention, ultimately hindering academic progress.

Pre-Screening Preparation

This section outlines key considerations for establishing a strong foundation for Universal Literacy Screening for students with SID.

- Identify and select an effective universal screening tool that is specifically designed or adapted for students with intellectual disabilities to ensure fair and effective evaluation.
- Develop district guidelines for ensuring universal literacy screening is accessible to students with SID.
- Provide targeted professional development for special educators/special service providers, preferably those with strong backgrounds in evidenced-based literacy practices, on how to administer the universal literacy screening tool to students with SID, ensuring familiarity with necessary accommodations, modifications, or assistive technologies.
- Collect detailed information on students' linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, including prior exposure to literacy experiences and instruction, to create a comprehensive profile for each student:
    - Educational history
    - Family history of dyslexia or learning difficulties
    - Language development milestones
    - Family interviews
    - Teacher observations
    - Previous assessments and current/past formal academic records

Screening Implementation

This section provides guidelines for implementing appropriate and effective universal literacy screening administration practices for students with SID.

- Ensure flexibility in administering the screening tool to allow for adaptations based on individual student needs:
    - Provide accommodations, such as visual cues and hands-on supports, as needed.
    - Implement assistive technologies, such as augmentative and alternative communication devices.
    - Allow flexible timing and breaks to accommodate students' needs and ensure optimal engagement.
- Use comprehensible instructions and interactive elements to engage students and reduce potential barriers to assessment.
- Avoid pre-teaching words and/or passages found in the screening tool.
- Provide for diagnostic assessment of students' foundational reading skills when necessary. Students with SID may still be building foundational reading skills designated in other grade-level standards, so it can be beneficial to assess older students for skills typically assessed in earlier grade-level benchmarks. For example, phonemic awareness is only assessed in kindergarten and grade one and is a critical skill for predicting reading proficiency.

Screening Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section outlines steps for analyzing and interpreting universal literacy screening data for students with SID.

- Compare student performance against both age-appropriate literacy benchmarks and performance of peers with similar cognitive impairments and age, considering individualized growth over time.
- Examine patterns in literacy skills across different accessible formats to understand how accessibility impacts overall literacy development.
- Factor in the unique developmental trajectories of students with SID when interpreting results, ensuring a holistic understanding of literacy progress.
- Evaluate student performance for strengths and areas for growth in specific literacy domains, such as phonological awareness, word recognition, and comprehension, with consideration of their unique linguistic and cognitive profiles.
- Involve interdisciplinary teams (e.g., Child Study Team members, reading specialists, special educators, speech-language specialists, assistive technology specialists) in data interpretation to ensure multiple perspectives are considered in analysis.

Instruction and Intervention Planning

This section outlines steps for designing effective multi-tiered instructional supports for students with SID.

Tier 1 Core Instruction

Include Clear Support Structures

Supports, scaffolds, and modifications should be in place to ensure evidence-based literacy practices are accessible and that students with SID can participate meaningfully in literacy instruction that is applicable to their daily lives.

Emphasize Oral Language Development and Vocabulary Expansion

Oral language development is the foundation of literacy. Provide structured, interactive language experiences that engage students at their developmental level.

Use Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Strategies

Provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to make learning accessible for all students.

Utilize Culturally Relevant Materials and Instructional Strategies

Ensure that instruction reflects the backgrounds and experiences of students with SID.

Tier 2 and 3 Intervention

Use Universal Literacy Screening Data for Intervention Planning

After analyzing and interpreting data for students with SID considering their unique linguistic and cognitive profiles, administer diagnostic assessments to identify their specific skill needs for effective intervention planning.

Coordinate Intervention and IEP Planning

Ensure coherence when developing tier 2 or 3 intervention plans and special education IEP goals based on individual student needs, differentiated instructional strategies, accommodations, modifications, and assistive technologies.

Ongoing Progress Monitoring

This section outlines steps for the consistent formative assessment of students with SID to track their reading skill development over time.

- Utilize progress monitoring probes from the universal screening tool regularly for students with severe intellectual disabilities identified as having a high risk status on the Universal Literacy Screening and specific skill needs identified through the diagnostic assessment.
- Analyze data with a focus on the unique developmental trajectories of students with SID
- Adjust interventions based on the students' unique linguistic and cognitive profiles and their response to intervention.

Quality Assurance

This section outlines the steps needed to review the identification of literacy difficulties in students with SID to prevent over- or under-identification.

- Implement a system for reviewing the identification process at regular intervals to ensure that students with SID are not over-, under-, or misidentified as struggling readers.
- Consider students' overall linguistic and cognitive profiles and use multiple data points to guide instructional decision making
- Engage families, special educators, and other relevant professionals in the identification process to ensure comprehensive input into decisions.
- Maintain high expectations while providing appropriate support.

Considerations for Accommodations and Modifications

Assessing students with SID with standard evaluation tools presents challenges due to cognitive limitations in understanding test items, and varying communication methods. Depending on the task being assessed, the student's developmental level, their preferred mode of communication (e.g., non-verbal, AAC devices), and their familiarity with specific instructional approaches or support programs, traditional assessment tools may not accurately reflect their abilities. Accommodations might include extended time, use of manipulatives, or assistive technologies like Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC)/Voice Output Communication Aid (VOCA) devices.

Students with SID are a heterogenous group. The educational staff and special education/service provider specialists working with the student would be most appropriate to determine the level and type of accommodations. The determination of accessible accommodations would be based on the student's background, primary language, and linguistic proficiency.

Additional Resources

- Communication Matrix
- Communication Supports Inventory
- Fine Motor Skills Checklist
- Literacy Skills Checklist
- Most-to-least and least-to-most prompting
- Ohio's Administering Literacy Assessments for Students with Low Incidence Disabilities and Complex Communications Needs
- Research-Based Practices for Creating Access to the General Curriculum in Reading and Literacy for Students with Significant Intellectual Disabilities
- Sensory Checklist
- Teaching Foundational Reading Skills to Students With Intellectual Disabilities

Appendix B.2: School District Universal Literacy Screening Checklist for Students who are Blind or Visually Impaired

The Universal Literacy Screener Checklist for Students who are Blind or Visually Impaired is designed to help educators take a structured and individualized approach to literacy screening, instruction and intervention. By combining universal literacy screening practices with evidence-based instruction and interventions, it takes into account the unique learning needs of students who are blind or visually impaired, ensuring that assessment and instructional practices are both accessible and appropriate. The checklist emphasizes cultural and linguistic responsiveness, providing the foundation for equitable literacy practices that support all learners, particularly those with significant visual challenges.

It is essential for educators to assess students who are blind or visually impaired for potential reading difficulties as early as possible. Given the challenges of assessing literacy in this population, the vision education field continues to refine best practices and it may be helpful to first examine standard assessment protocols and evidence-based approaches in blindness and visual impairment education.

Pre-Screening Preparation

This section outlines key considerations for establishing a strong foundation for Universal Literacy Screening for students who are blind or visually impaired.

- Identify and select an effective universal screening tool that is specifically designed or adapted for students with visual impairments to ensure fair and effective evaluation.
- Develop district guidelines for ensuring universal literacy screening is accessible to students who are Blind or visually impaired.
- Provide targeted professional development for special educators/special service providers, preferably those with strong backgrounds in evidenced-based literacy practices, on how to administer the universal literacy screening tool to students who are Blind or visually impaired, ensuring familiarity with necessary accommodations, modifications, or assistive technologies.
- Collect detailed information on students' visual, linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, including prior exposure to literacy instruction, to create a comprehensive profile for each student:
    - Educational history
    - Family history of dyslexia or learning difficulties
    - Language development milestones
    - Family interviews
    - Teacher observations

    - Previous assessments and current/past formal academic records
- Consider the following assessments and embedded resources to determine needs:
    - Functional Vision Assessment (FVA)
    - Learning Media Assessment (LMA)
    - Tactile Skills Assessment
    - Emergent Literacy in Blind/VI Children

Functional Vision Assessment

This is a formal/informal assessment of how a child with low vision uses their vision in everyday life. It is not conducted on totally blind or those with **only** light perceptions. In addition, it assists or augments more formal evaluations (Learning Media Assessment) in determining the use of appropriate font sizes and conditions that are optimal for the individual student. For additional resources, consider reviewing the guidance found at the American Printing House for the Blind (APH) Connect Center.

Learning Media Assessment

This is a formal/informal evaluation conducted by a Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments (TVI) to determine a child's preferred reading and writing format. This may include Braille, audio, digital text, large print, assistive technology, or a combination of methods. The LMA also identifies the accessible educational materials (AEM) needed in class and assesses whether Braille instruction is necessary. Since Braille provides access to grammar and spelling in ways audio cannot, students often use mixed methods based on their vision level and personal preference. For additional resources, review the Overview of Learning Media Assessment.

Tactile Skills Assessment

The effective use of touch is crucial for students who are blind or visually impaired, requiring the development of a Tactile System for protection and discrimination. Braille users and those with language skills often have strong tactile discrimination, essential for literacy. These skills expand vocabulary through hands-on exploration. Assessing tactile abilities is vital, especially for young children, as difficulty in this area may indicate challenges in literacy acquisition. For more information, review the Tactile Learning Profile / Texas School for the Blind and Visually impaired.

Emergent Literacy in Blind/VI Children

Emergent literacy encompasses the early skills, knowledge, and attitudes children develop about reading and writing before formal instruction begins. For children who are blind, these foundational skills require deliberate instruction and adaptations to ensure accessibility and success. Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVIs) are essential in fostering emergent literacy, equipping students for academic growth, and nurturing a lifelong love of learning. (Willings, 2025) Therefore, students who are blind / visually impaired that are often identified as non-readers should be assessed and

instructed in “emergent literacy.” For more information, review the resources found at the Emergent Literacy / Perkins School for the Blind.

Screening Implementation

This section provides guidelines for implementing appropriate and effective universal literacy screening administration practices for students who are Blind or visually impaired.

- Ensure flexibility in administering the screening tool to allow for adaptations based on individual student needs:
    - Provide accommodations such as braille, large print, auditory materials, and tactile graphics, as needed. See Table 1 below.
    - Implement assistive technologies, such as screen readers, refreshable braille displays, or audio-supported assessment tools.
    - Allow flexible timing and breaks to accommodate students' needs and ensure optimal engagement.
- Ensure a quiet environment free from auditory and visual distractions to ensure optimal access to the tasks.
- Present assessments and screeners early in the day to lessen the impact of visual fatigue.
- Use comprehensible instructions and multimodal approaches, including visual, tactile, interactive engagement, and repetition to reduce potential barriers to assessment.
- Avoid pre-teaching words and/or passages found in the screening tool.

Screening Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section outlines steps for analyzing and interpreting universal literacy screening data for students who are Blind or visually impaired.

- Compare student performance against both age-appropriate literacy benchmarks and performance of peers with similar visual impairments and age, considering individualized growth over time.
- Examine patterns in literacy skills across different accessible formats to understand how accessibility impacts overall literacy development.
- Factor in the unique developmental trajectories of students with visual impairments when interpreting results, ensuring a holistic understanding of literacy progress.
- Evaluate student performance for strengths and areas for growth in specific literacy domains, such as braille literacy, auditory comprehension, and tactile reading strategies.

- Involve interdisciplinary teams (e.g., special educators, teachers of the visually impaired, assistive technology specialists) in data interpretation to ensure multiple perspectives are considered in analysis.

Instruction and Intervention Planning

This section outlines steps for designing effective multi-tiered instructional supports for students who are Blind or visually impaired.

Tier 1 Core Instruction

Encourage Best Practices in Blindness and Visual Impairment Education

Emphasize braille literacy, auditory learning strategies, the use of tactile materials, and repetition to enhance engagement and understanding.

Include Clear Support Structures

Supports, scaffolds, and modifications should be in place to ensure evidence-based literacy practices are accessible and that students who are Blind or visually impaired can participate meaningfully in literacy instruction that is applicable to their daily lives.

Use Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Strategies

Provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to make learning accessible for all students.

Utilize Culturally Relevant Materials and Instructional Strategies

Ensure that instruction reflects the backgrounds and experiences of students with visual impairments.

Tier 2 and 3 Intervention

Use Universal Literacy Screening Data for Intervention Planning

After analyzing and interpreting data for students who are Blind or visually impaired considering their unique visual and cognitive profiles, administer diagnostic assessments to identify their specific skill needs for effective intervention planning.

Provide Targeted Interventions

For students identified as needing additional support, focus on specific literacy domains such as auditory comprehension, braille proficiency, and adaptive reading skills.

Coordinate Intervention and IEP Planning

Ensure coherence when developing tier 2 or 3 intervention plans and special education IEP goals based on individual student needs in specific literacy domains such as auditory comprehension, braille proficiency, and adaptive reading skills, communication development strategies, including the use of braille note-taking devices, screen readers, and assistive technologies.

Ongoing Progress Monitoring

This section outlines steps for the consistent formative assessment of Blind or visually impaired students to track their reading skill development over time.

- Utilize progress monitoring probes from the universal screening tool regularly for Blind or visually impaired students identified as having a high risk status on the Universal Literacy Screening and specific skill needs identified through the diagnostic assessment (e.g., braille fluency, auditory comprehension, decoding, comprehension).
- Compare student performance against both age-appropriate literacy benchmarks and performance of peers with similar visual impairments and age, considering individualized growth.
- Adjust interventions based on students' unique visual and cognitive profiles and their response to intervention.

Quality Assurance

This section outlines the steps needed to review the identification of literacy difficulties in Blind or visually impaired students to prevent over- or under-identification.

- Implement a system for reviewing the identification process at regular intervals to ensure that students who are deaf and hard of hearing are not misidentified as struggling readers due to accessibility challenges.
- Consider students' overall visual and cognitive profiles and use multiple data points to guide the identification of literacy challenges.
- Engage families, teachers of the visually impaired, and other relevant professionals in the identification process to ensure comprehensive input into decisions.
- Maintain high expectations while providing appropriate support.

Considerations for Accommodations and Modifications

Assessing students who are blind or visually impaired with standard evaluation tools presents unique challenges due to accessibility concerns, the visual nature of many test items, and variations in how students interact with printed and digital content. Many accommodations that improve accessibility—such as converting text into Braille, large print, or audio formats—may also impact the validity and reliability of an assessment. Therefore, it is essential to consider not only the format of the test but also the appropriateness of visual concepts for each student.

Students who are blind or visually impaired represent a diverse population with varying levels of vision, literacy skills, and familiarity with assistive technology. Because of this variability, the most effective accommodations should be determined by educational staff and specialists who understand the student's individual needs. Decisions should take into account the student's primary mode of accessing information, their linguistic proficiency, and their experience with adapted materials.

Because no single set of accommodations applies to all students, it is crucial for IEP teams to rely on their professional judgment and knowledge of the individual student when determining the most appropriate modifications. By considering each student's background and learning needs, educators can implement structured protocols that provide meaningful and equitable assessments. Links to additional resources can be found below for further guidance on accessible literacy assessments.

Additional Resources

Assessment Needs

- American Printing House for the Blind (APH) Connect Center
- Overview of Learning Media Assessment
- Tactile Learning Profile / Texas School for the Blind and Visually impaired
- Emergent Literacy / Perkins School for the Blind

Paths to Literacy

- Understanding Dyslexia in Children with Visual Impairment
- Pre-Braille Assessment
- Reading Readiness for Braille
- Braille Readiness Grid/ Center for the Visually Impaired
- Assessment of Braille Literacy Skills: Unified English Braille (UEB) / Region 4 ESC
- Administering Literacy Assessments for Students with Low Incidence Disabilities and Complex Communications Needs

Appendix B.3: School District Universal Literacy Screening Checklist for Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing

The Universal Literacy Screener Checklist for Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing is designed to help educators take a structured and individualized approach to literacy screening, instruction, and intervention. By combining universal literacy screening practices with evidence-based instruction and interventions, it takes into account the unique learning needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, ensuring that assessment and instructional practices are both accessible and appropriate. The checklist emphasizes cultural and linguistic responsiveness, providing the foundation for equitable literacy practices that support all learners, particularly those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

It is essential for educators to assess students who are deaf or hard of hearing for potential reading difficulties as early as possible. Some young children who are deaf or hard of hearing have had very little access to formal language, spoken or signed, before entering school; therefore, it is important to ensure that any perceived difficulties are not due to receptive and expressive language delays. These students who possess minimal language skills due to language deprivation will require intensive interventions. Early literacy assessments ensure that support is provided promptly, helping to close skill gaps. Delaying assessments could lead to unnecessary delays in intervention, ultimately hindering academic progress.

Pre-Screening Preparation

This section outlines key considerations for establishing a strong foundation for Universal Literacy Screening for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Identify and select an effective universal screening tool that is specifically designed or adapted for students who are deaf or hard of hearing to ensure fair and effective evaluation. Key considerations include the accessibility of auditory-based assessments and whether the addition of sign language or fingerspelling impact validity by altering the intended measurement. Computer-based assessments are often less accessible than live versions for deaf or hard of hearing students. ASL users might also struggle to understand recorded sign language materials.

Provide targeted professional development for special educators/special service providers, preferably those with strong backgrounds in evidenced-based literacy practices, on how to administer the universal literacy screening tool to students who are deaf or hard of hearing, ensuring familiarity with necessary accommodations, modifications, or assistive technologies.

Collect detailed information on students' hearing levels, linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, including prior exposure to literacy experiences and instruction and language modality (e.g., sign language, spoken language, cued speech), to create a comprehensive profile for each student:

- Educational history
- Family history of dyslexia or learning difficulties
- Language development milestones
- Family interviews
- Teacher observations
- Previous assessments and current/past formal academic records

Develop district guidelines for ensuring universal literacy screening is accessible to students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Administer practice test items to determine accessibility and the appropriate assessment format for the student. Consider the following assessments to determine needs:

- Listening check
- Functional listening evaluation

Listening Check

A listening check is used to determine if the student has access to the requisite auditory information included in the assessment to assist in determining the validity of the tests.
Resource: Ling-Madell-Hewitt Test for Monitoring Listening (LMH)

Functional Listening Evaluation

A functional listening evaluation is used to determine how listening abilities are affected by noise, distance, and visual access in an individual's natural listening environment.
Resource: Functional Listening Evaluation (FLE)

Screening Implementation

This section provides guidelines for implementing appropriate and effective universal literacy screening administration practices for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

- Ensure flexibility in administering the screening tool to allow for adaptations based on individual student needs:
    - Provide accommodations, such as sign language (depending on what is being assessed), visual supports, and alternative formats, including early ASL literacy assessments, as needed. See Endnote below.
    - Implement hearing assistive technologies, such as FM/DM/Bluetooth/remote microphone systems, hearing aids, and cochlear implants.
    - Allow flexible timing and breaks to accommodate students' needs and ensure optimal engagement.
- Ensure a quiet environment free from auditory and visual distractions to ensure optimal access to the tasks.
- Present assessments and screeners early in the day to lessen the impact of listening fatigue.
- Use comprehensible instructions and multimodal approaches, including visual, tactile, interactive engagement, and repetition to reduce potential barriers to assessment.
- Avoid pre-teaching words and/or passages found in the screening tool.

Screening Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section outlines steps for analyzing and interpreting universal literacy screening data for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

- Compare student performance against both age-appropriate literacy benchmarks and performance of peers with similar hearing levels and age and quality of exposure to accessible language, considering individualized growth over time. If utilizing audition, compare the student's performance with their most recent audiological evaluation to determine if the errors are consistent with their audiological evaluation.
- Examine patterns in literacy skills across different language modalities (e.g., ASL-English bilingual development, spoken language literacy) to understand how language acquisition impacts overall literacy development. Consider that students who use ASL as their primary or first language are multilingual learners who are acquiring more than one language. If the screener is determined to be accessible, caution should still be used when interpreting the results to ensure errors are not due to hearing differences. For some students, auditory access can fluctuate daily or throughout the day depending on factors such as listening fatigue.

- Factor in the developmental trajectories of students who are deaf or hard of hearing when interpreting results, ensuring a holistic understanding of literacy progress.
- Evaluate student performance for strengths and areas for growth in specific literacy domains, such as phonological awareness (if applicable), phonics (if applicable), reading fluency, and comprehension.
- Involve interdisciplinary teams (e.g., teachers of the deaf, speech-language pathologists, assistive technology specialists) in data interpretation to ensure multiple perspectives are considered in analysis.

Instruction and Intervention Planning

This section outlines steps for designing effective multi-tiered instructional supports for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Tier 1 Core Instruction

Encourage a Bilingual Approach for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students who are Multilingual Learners

Emphasize bilingual literacy development for students who use American Sign Language and English or two spoken languages who are multilingual learners.

Include Clear Support Structures

Supports, scaffolds, and modifications should be in place to ensure evidence-based literacy practices are accessible and that students who are deaf and hard of hearing can participate meaningfully in literacy instruction that is applicable to their daily lives.

Use Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Strategies

Provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to make learning accessible for all students.

Utilize Culturally Relevant Materials and Instructional Strategies

Ensure that instruction reflects the backgrounds and experiences of students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Tier 2 and 3 Intervention

Use Universal Literacy Screening Data for Intervention Planning

After analyzing and interpreting data for students who are deaf and hard of hearing considering their unique hearing, linguistic, and cognitive profiles, administer diagnostic assessments to identify their specific skill needs for effective intervention planning.

Coordinate Intervention and IEP Planning

Ensure coherence when developing tier 2 or 3 intervention plans and special education IEP goals based on individual student needs, differentiated instructional strategies, accommodations, modifications, and assistive technologies.

Ongoing Progress Monitoring

This section outlines steps for the consistent formative assessment of deaf or hard of hearing students to track their reading skill development over time.

- Utilize progress monitoring probes from the universal screening tool regularly for deaf or hard of hearing students identified as having a high-risk status on the Universal Literacy Screening and specific skill needs identified through the diagnostic assessment.
- Compare student performance against both age-appropriate literacy benchmarks and performance of peers with similar hearing levels and age and quality of exposure to accessible language, considering individualized growth.
- Adjust interventions based on students' unique hearing levels, language modalities and linguistic profiles and their response to intervention.

Quality Assurance

This section outlines the steps needed to review the identification of literacy difficulties in deaf or hard of hearing students to prevent over- or under-identification.

- Implement a system for reviewing the identification process at regular intervals to ensure that students who are deaf and hard of hearing are not misidentified as struggling readers due to language access barriers.
- Consider students' overall hearing levels, language modalities, linguistic, and cognitive profiles and use multiple data points to guide the identification of literacy challenges.
- Engage families, teachers of the deaf, and other relevant professionals in the identification process to ensure comprehensive input into decisions.
- Maintain high expectations while providing appropriate support.

Considerations for Accommodations and Modifications

Assessing deaf or hard of hearing students with standard evaluation tools presents challenges due to accessibility, auditory bias in test items, and cultural differences. Depending on the task being assessed, the language and mode of communication the students use, and the programs they are familiar with, accommodations might include Visual Phonics, cued speech, or sign language, including fingerspelling.

Students who are deaf or hard of hearing are a heterogenous group. The educational staff and deaf education specialists working with the student would be most appropriate to determine the level and type of accommodations. The determination of accessible accommodations would be based on the student's background, primary language, and linguistic proficiency.

Resources

- Administering Literacy Assessments for Students with Low Incidence Disabilities and Complex Communications Needs
- Fingerspelling Our Way to Reading
- 15 Principals for Reading to Deaf Children
- Language First Resources for Professionals Working with Deaf Students
- READ Act Guidance for Students who are Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing

Appendix C: Multilingual Learner Screening Checklist

The Universal Literacy Screening Checklist for Multilingual Learners (ML) is designed to help educators take a structured and individualized approach to literacy screening, instruction, and intervention. By combining universal literacy screening practices with evidence-based instruction and interventions, it takes into account the unique learning needs of multilingual learners, ensuring that assessment and instructional practices are both accessible and appropriate. The checklist emphasizes cultural and linguistic responsiveness, providing the foundation for equitable literacy practices that support all learners, particularly those learning to read in English as an additional language.

It is essential for educators to assess multilingual learners for potential reading difficulties as early as possible. Early literacy assessments ensure that support is provided without waiting for full English proficiency to be reached. Delaying assessments could lead to unnecessary delays in intervention, ultimately hindering academic progress.

Pre-Screening Preparation

This section outlines key considerations for establishing a strong foundation for Universal Literacy Screening for MLs.

Identify and select an effective universal screening tool that allows for assessment administration in both the student's home language and English when available. If the universal screening tool does not provide an option to assess in the student's home language, schools should consider using assessment measures that have been translated or adapted by highly trained translators, interpreters, or service providers. These measures should be used as a supplement, rather than a replacement, for the required universal screening tool's assessment measures.

Develop district guidelines for ensuring universal literacy screening is accessible to multilingual learners. Include guidance, such as:

- Ensure universal literacy screening corresponds to language(s) of instruction (e.g., both languages for bilingual and/or dual language programs). The student's language of instruction educational program (LIEP) can be found in your SIS/NJSMART data.
- Record translated instructions for consistency of screening administration across diverse language groups.

Provide targeted professional development for ESL/bilingual educators, preferably those with strong backgrounds in evidenced-based literacy practices, on how to administer the universal literacy screening tool to MLs, ensuring familiarity with assessment measure translations or adaptations and scoring guidance for language variation.

Collect detailed information on students' linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, including prior exposure to literacy experiences and instruction, to create a comprehensive profile for each student:

- Educational history including years of language and reading instruction
- Family history of dyslexia or learning difficulties
- Language development milestones
- Current language proficiency levels in listening, speaking, reading, and writing which can be obtained from ACCESS, WIDA rubrics, and WIDA Screener
- Family interviews
- Teacher observations
- Previous assessments and current/past formal academic records

Screening Administration

This section provides guidelines for implementing appropriate and effective universal literacy screening administration practices for MLs.

- Verify understanding of tasks in students' home languages before administering the assessment measures, as needed.
- Use comprehensible instructions in students' home languages, when possible, to reduce potential barriers to assessment.
- Avoid pre-teaching words and/or passages found in the screening tool.
- Adhere to scoring guidance for language variation (such as a phoneme pronunciation guide) to avoid penalizing students for dialect, accent, or articulation differences.
- Provide for diagnostic assessment of students' foundational reading skills when necessary. Language proficiency levels are not tied to grade levels, so it can be beneficial to assess older students for skills typically assessed in earlier grade-level benchmarks. For example, phonemic awareness is only assessed in kindergarten and grade one and is a critical skill for successful reading in both Spanish and English (Cárdenas-Hagan & Tridas, 2023).

Screening Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section outlines steps for analyzing and interpreting universal literacy screening data for MLs.

- Compare student performance against both age-appropriate literacy benchmarks and performance of peers with similar home and English language/literacy proficiency levels, current age/grade, age of exposure to English, and time in current school/academic program, considering individualized growth over time.
- Evaluate student performance for strengths and areas for growth in specific literacy domains, such as phonological awareness, word recognition, and comprehension in both languages, when possible:
    - Consider language-specific characteristics (e.g., transparency of home language orthography versus English).
    - Interpret decoding, fluency, and spelling performance through contrastive analysis.
    - Review oral reading fluency in context of vocabulary and oral language development.
- Involve interdisciplinary teams (e.g., ESL educators, bilingual teachers), in data interpretation to ensure multiple perspectives are considered in analysis.

Instruction and Intervention Planning

This section outlines steps for designing effective multi-tiered instructional supports for MLs.

Tier 1 Core Instruction

Encourage Translanguaging

Translanguaging allows multilingual learners to leverage their full linguistic repertoire by using both their home language and English during literacy instruction. Emphasize multilingual literacy development to reinforce concepts and help learners make connections between languages, ultimately strengthening their literacy skills in English while valuing and preserving their cultural and linguistic identities.

Integrate Oral Language Development across Home Language and English

Oral language development is the foundation of literacy. As MLs are learning to listen, speak, read, and write in English, oral language development should also be encouraged in their home language, whether in a bilingual program or at home. Strong oracy skills in the home language have a positive effect on English language development (The Reading League & National Committee for Effective Literacy, 2023).

Expand Vocabulary Knowledge

Daily, explicit vocabulary instruction is essential in teaching MLs to read (Gersten et al., 2007). Instruction should include the teaching of cognates and morphology across languages to build students' academic language, promote understanding of how words work, and how to utilize word knowledge effectively (McKeown, 2019).

Build Content Knowledge

Teaching language through content leads to improved academic language comprehension, which is essential to becoming a skilled reader. Building content knowledge in conjunction with language and reading comprehension instruction has many benefits for MLs, including building their background knowledge and ability to make meaning within and across content areas (WIDA, 2020). Effective reading instruction should develop both language comprehension and word recognition skills (Scarborough, 2001) as well as reading comprehension strategies (Peng et al., 2024) such as the use of graphic organizers, inferring, monitoring, questioning, summarization, and explicit instruction in text structure (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Use Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Strategies

Provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to make learning accessible for all students.

Utilize Culturally Relevant Materials and Instructional Strategies

Ensure that instruction reflects the backgrounds and experiences of multilingual learners.

Maintain Dedicated English Language Development Time

Reading intervention supports should not be a replacement for English language development/ESL services that are a part of tier 1 core instruction (The Reading League & National Committee for Effective Literacy, 2023).

Tier 2 and 3 Intervention

Use Universal Literacy Screening Data for Intervention Planning

After analyzing and interpreting data for MLs considering "true peer" comparisons, background information, and performance patterns across both languages, administer diagnostic assessments to identify their specific skill needs for effective intervention planning.

Coordinate Intervention Planning and ESL/Bilingual Programming

Ensure coherence when developing tier 2 or 3 intervention plans and ESL/bilingual programming based on individual student needs.

Ongoing Progress Monitoring

This section outlines steps for the consistent formative assessment of multilingual learners to track their reading skill development over time.

- Utilize progress monitoring probes from the universal screening tool regularly for MLs identified as having a high-risk status on the Universal Literacy Screening and specific skill needs identified through the diagnostic assessment.
- Monitor targeted skill development in both languages, when applicable and possible.
- Compare student performance against both age-appropriate literacy benchmarks and performance of peers with similar home and English language/literacy proficiency levels, current age/grade, age of exposure to English, and time in current school/academic program, considering individualized growth.
- Adjust interventions based on students' unique linguistic profiles and their response to intervention.

Quality Assurance

This section outlines the steps needed to review the identification of literacy difficulties in MLs to prevent over- or under-identification.

- Implement a system for reviewing the identification process at regular intervals to ensure that MLs are not misidentified as struggling readers due to language access barriers.
- Consider students' overall linguistic profiles and use multiple data points to guide instructional decision making (e.g., ACCESS, WIDA rubrics, WIDA screener, local benchmarks)
- Use middle and end-of-year Universal Literacy Screening data for Kindergarten students.
- Engage families, ESL/bilingual educators, and other relevant professionals in the identification process to ensure comprehensive input into decisions.
- Maintain high expectations while providing appropriate support.

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Appendix D.1: Sample Family Letter — Introducing Families to Screening Procedures

Please note that this is an example that can be adapted for your local community.

Dear [Parent/Guardian Name],

As we begin the new school year, [District Name] would like to introduce you to our early literacy universal screening process for students in kindergarten through grade three. This screening is a crucial part of our literacy program and is designed to help identify students who may benefit from targeted literacy support early in their education.

Early literacy universal screening involves assessing students' reading skills at least twice a year, as required by New Jersey law. These assessments help us gather valuable information about each child's reading development and guide us in providing appropriate support. It's important to note that this screening is not a diagnosis or indication of a disability; rather, it is a tool we use to promote each child's success as a reader.

We will use the [name of the screener]. The assessment will be administered by a teacher or staff member and will take approximately [X minutes] to complete.

After the screening is complete, we will provide you with a Family Report detailing your child's literacy screening results, including how they compare to grade-level norms. It will also provide information about the various support services available in the district, including reading intervention programs, to help your child succeed.

We believe that universal literacy screening is an essential step in ensuring every child has the opportunity to become a successful reader. Thank you for your continued partnership, and please feel free to reach out with any questions about the screening process.

Warm regards,

[Superintendent/Principal Name]
[Title]

[School Name]
[Contact Information]

Appendix D.2: Sample Family Letter for Student Universal Screening Results

Please note that this is an example that can be adapted for your local community.

Dear [Parent/Guardian's Name],

As part of our commitment to supporting literacy development, [District Name] conducts universal literacy screenings for students in kindergarten through grade three. These assessments help us adjust our core instruction and identify students who may benefit from targeted literacy support early in their education.

State law requires schools to screen students twice a year using an approved literacy assessment. If a child's screening results indicate a need for additional support, our school will offer interventions, which may include extra instruction or further assessments.

Your child was screened using [Screener Name]. Here are your child's screening results:

- **Student Name:** [Student Name]
- **Grade Level**: [Grade]
- **Screening Scores**: [Scores on All Grade Level Skill Indicators]
- **Grade-Level Benchmarks:** [Benchmark Ranges for All Grade Level Skill Indicators]

If your child's results indicate the need for additional support, the school district offers services such as small-group instruction, one-on-one interventions, or other reading assistance programs. We will be in touch with you soon to discuss the next steps to support your child.

We value your partnership in supporting your child's reading development. If you have any questions or would like more information about the available reading supports, please feel free to contact [Teacher's Name/School Contact] at [Phone Number] or [Email Address].

Thank you for working with us to support your child's literacy growth!

Warm regards,

[Your Name]
[Your Position]
[School Name]
[Contact Information]

Appendix E.1: Overview for Families

New Jersey Department of Education
Evidence-Based Literacy Guidance for Families

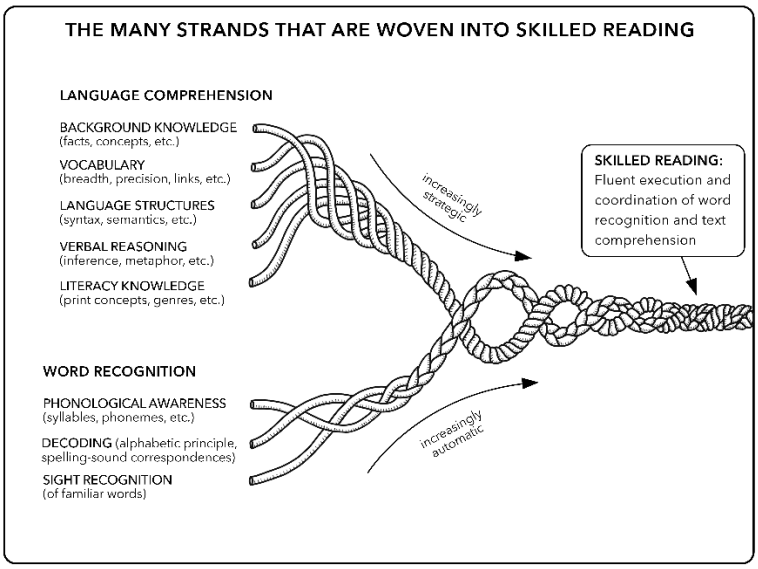
Purpose

The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) is committed to giving every child the best possible start on their literacy journey. This guide helps parents and guardians understand how schools support literacy development in students and what to expect along the way.

Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction

Reading is a complex skill made up of many different parts that work together, much like the strands of a rope. Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001) is a visual model that helps explain how these skills combine to create strong readers. The Reading Rope has two main parts:

- **Word Recognition:** This includes phonemic awareness (understanding sounds in words), phonics (connecting letters and sounds), and sight recognition of familiar words.
- **Language Comprehension**: This includes vocabulary (knowing the meaning of words), background knowledge (understanding the topic), and verbal reasoning (making sense of ideas and stories).



As children grow into fluent readers, the strands weave together, strengthening reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities. Reading and writing are intricately connected processes that reinforce each other, with improvements in one area naturally enhancing the other.

Reading and Writing Practices

To help children become strong readers and writers, there should be a focus on both understanding words and language. Research shows that effective literacy instruction includes certain key practices:

1. **Clear Learning Goals:** Teachers clearly explain what students will learn and how they will show they understand it.
2. **Direct Instruction:** Teachers introduce new skills with clear explanations, examples, and demonstrations.

3. **Guided Practice with Feedback:** Students practice new skills with support from the teacher and receive helpful feedback along the way.
4. **Independent Practice:** Students have opportunities to practice on their own, applying what they have learned without teacher help.
5. **Checking Understanding:** Teachers regularly assess if students have mastered skills and decide if further support is needed.

This approach ensures students are developing the skills they need to become proficient readers and writers.

Understanding Universal Literacy Screening

New Jersey passed new legislation (P.L. 2024, c.52) to ensure that all students receive strong literacy instruction. These screenings help schools understand how students develop key reading skills and identify those needing extra support. By using research-based tools, schools can provide timely interventions and improve reading instruction for all children.

Why Literacy Screening Matters

Strong reading and writing skills are essential for student success in school and beyond. Research shows that children who struggle with literacy early on may continue to face challenges later. Literacy screening helps:

- Identify students who may need extra help.
- Provide targeted instruction to strengthen reading and writing skills.
- Ensure every child gets the support they need to succeed.

How Literacy Screening Works

According to the legislation, schools must conduct literacy screenings at least twice a year, at the beginning and the middle of the school year. However, school districts may administer the literacy screener a third time at the end of the year. These assessments measure important literacy skills on letter naming, phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, oral reading fluency, and comprehension. When supporting these literacy skills at home, parents and guardians may want to take these questions into consideration:

- Can the student name both uppercase and lowercase letters? (letter naming)
- Can the student identify the first, middle, and last sound in words like cat (ccc...aah..ttt)? (phonemic awareness)
- Can the student sound out written words? (phonics and decoding)
- Can the student read stories quickly, smoothly, and accurately? (oral reading fluency)
- Can the student understand and gain meaning from texts, such as filling in the blank in a sentence or writing about it? (comprehension)

After Screening

Parents and guardians will receive reports explaining the results and recommendations for additional support based on the screening outcomes. Educators will work closely with families to ensure the right interventions and supports are in place to help students succeed.

Additional Information

For more details, parents and guardians may reach out to their child's teacher or school administrator. The full guidance can be found on the NJDOE's Learning Equity and Academic Recovery website. Together, we can build a strong foundation for a child's literacy success!

Appendix E.2: Overview for Educators

New Jersey Department of Education
Evidence-Based Literacy Guidance for Educators

Purpose

The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) is implementing a comprehensive, research-driven approach to literacy education that ensures evidence-based reading and writing instruction for all students. This guide provides educational professionals with a detailed framework for understanding and implementing evidence-based literacy screening and intervention strategies, aligned with the latest educational research and state-mandated literacy initiatives.

Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction

When understanding evidence-based literacy instruction, the simple view of reading explains that reading comprehension depends on two key factors: word recognition and language comprehension. Watch this brief video: *The Simple View of Reading* to learn more.

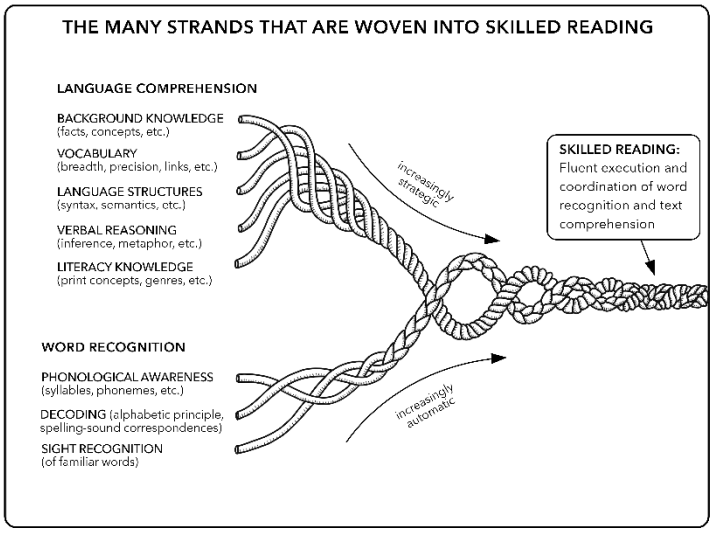
To ensure all students develop reading proficiency, core instruction must focus on both word recognition and language comprehension, particularly in kindergarten through third grade. This is illustrated by Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001). Effective literacy instruction explicitly teaches these essential components:

Word Recognition:

- **Phonological Awareness:** Understanding sound structures in language.
- **Decoding:** Using letter-sound knowledge to read words.
- **Sight Recognition:** Instantly recognizing words for fluent reading.

Language Comprehension:

- **Background Knowledge:** Recalling information about a topic to support new learning
- **Vocabulary:** Understanding word meanings in different contexts.
- **Language Structure:** Knowing grammar, sentence structure, and meaning relationships.
- **Verbal Reasoning:** Making inferences and understanding figurative language.
- **Literacy Knowledge:** Recognizing text features, print concepts, and reading strategies.



Evidence-based reading instruction follows structured, research-based teaching practices that include:

- Clear Learning Goals: Teachers clearly state what students will learn.
- Direct Instruction: Teachers model and explain new skills.
- Guided Practice: Students practice skills with feedback and support.
- Independent Practice: Students apply skills on their own.
- Check for Understanding: Teachers check for understanding and adjust instruction as needed.

Watch these brief videos Elements of Effective Instruction: Word Recognition and Elements of Effective Instruction: Language Comprehension to learn more.

By implementing these evidence-based strategies, educators can ensure that all students develop strong literacy skills necessary for academic success.

Understanding Universal Literacy Screening

Early and systematic screening is required by P.L.2024 c.52 and is crucial for identifying and addressing reading challenges before they become long-term issues. Universal screening helps determine if core instruction is meeting the needs of most students and identifies those needing additional support to close skill gaps.

Why Literacy Screening Matters

Effective screening addresses individual learning needs, ensures educational equity, and prevents future difficulties. Students' performance on these subtests in the early grades (K–3) can be used to predict the degree to which they may benefit from additional early literacy support. This proactive approach can be used to inform immediate needs and align instructional strategies with students' developing skills (Gersten et al., 2008). Universal literacy screening empowers educators to make proactive, data-informed instructional decisions to improve literacy outcomes.

How Literacy Screening Works

The table below shows key skills to assess at each grade level:

Grade	Letter Naming Fluency	Phonetic Awareness	Phonics and Decoding	Oral Reading Fluency	Comprehension
K	✓	✓	✓		
1	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2			✓	✓	✓
3			✓	✓	✓
4+				✓	✓

After Screening

Screening data should inform both core instruction and intervention. If more than 20% of students score below benchmark, adjustments to Tier 1 instruction may be necessary. The following actions may be taken based on the data:

- Students meeting grade-level expectations continue with core literacy instruction.
- Students who demonstrate risk factors receive targeted intervention.
- Educators use screening data to adjust instruction, implement intervention strategies, and communicate with families about student progress.

For additional resources and full guidance from the NJDOE, visit the Learning Equity and Academic Recovery webpage. By working together, educators can ensure every student builds a strong foundation for reading success.

Appendix F: Text Versions of Diagrams

This appendix includes the text version of each diagram in the document.

Text Version: Reading Rope Diagram

The many strands that are woven into skilled reading

The Reading Rope consists of lower and upper strands. The word-recognition strands (phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition of familiar words) work together as the reader becomes accurate, fluent, and increasingly automatic with repetition and practice.

Language Comprehension (Upper Strands)

Strands include:

- Background knowledge (facts, concepts, etc.)
- Vocabulary (breadth, precision, links, etc.)
- Language structures (syntax, semantics, etc.)
- Verbal reasoning (inference, metaphor, etc.)
- Literacy knowledge (print concepts, genres, etc.)

Word Recognition (Lower Strands)

Strands include:

- Phonological awareness (syllable, phonemes, etc.)
- Decoding (alphabetic principle, spelling-sound correspondences
- Sight recognition (of familiar words)

Skilled Reading

Language comprehension becomes increasingly strategic and word recognition becomes increasingly automatic in the progression to becoming a skilled reader. A skilled reader displays fluent execution and coordination of word recognition and text comprehension.

Back to paragraph after Figure 1

Text Version: Data-Informed Instruction

This diagram is a visual model of data-informed instruction within a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS).

Universal Screening

At the center top is “Universal Screening” represented by a globe icon. Two pathways emerge from the screening process:

- Tier 1 instruction with fidelity monitoring (left side)
- Tier 2 and 3 Intervention with fidelity monitoring (right side)

Tier 1 Instruction with Fidelity Monitoring

The left side represents the implementation of Tier 1 Instruction with fidelity monitoring.

- **Core instruction:** signified by a yellow layered icon
- **Core analysis:** analysis process that monitors the quality of core instruction (signified by a clipboard)
- **Monitoring student progress in grade-level skill mastery**: signified by magnifying glass

Tier 2 and 3 Intervention with Fidelity Monitoring

The right side represents the implementation of Tier 2/3 Intervention with fidelity monitoring.

- **Targeted and intensive instruction:** signified by an orange layered icon
- **Diagnostics:** the assessment of skill needs (signified by a clipboard with a diagnostic waveform
- **Monitoring student progress:** response to intervention (signified by a magnifying glass)

Arrows connect all elements in a cyclical process, showing continuous progress monitoring and instructional adjustments.

Back to paragraph after Figure 2

Text Version: Review of Universal Screening Data

This diagram is a flowchart depicting decision-making following universal screening in a multi-tiered support system.

The sections from top to bottom are:

1. Review of universal screening data (represented by a globe icon)
2. Progress monitoring outcomes for students receiving interventions

1. Review of Universal Screening Data

This review leads to three possible student performance outcomes:

- At or above benchmark **and** average performance observed in classroom (left path shown in green)
    - Continue evidence-based core instruction (Tier 1)
    - Monitor student progress of grade-level skill mastery (magnifying glass icon)
- At or above benchmark **but** poor performance observed in classroom (middle path shown in orange)
    - Administer diagnostic assessments and deliver interventions with increased intensity (Tier 2/3)
    - Differentiate Tier 1 instruction
    - Monitor student progress for response to intervention
- Below benchmark (right path shown in red)
    - Same process as orange path:
        - Diagnostics
        - Tier 2/3 interventions
        - Differentiated Tier 1
        - Response monitoring

2. Progress Monitoring Outcomes for Students Receiving Interventions

Bottom section for students receiving interventions (from the red/orange pathways).

If progress monitoring confirms a consistent, appropriate rate of improvement:

- Continue intervention and monitor
- If improvement declines later, reassess

If progress monitoring confirms slow or poor improvement:

- Analyze intervention fidelity
- Continue interventions with increased intensity **and** refer to Child Study Team (CST) for comprehensive evaluation
- Use data from screening, diagnostics, and progress monitoring for decision-making

Back to section after Figure 3 (Adequate and Sustained Progress)