



# Early Literacy Communications Toolkit

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## About ExcelinEd

The Foundation for Excellence in Education (ExcelinEd) is a national leader in education reform. ExcelinEd is a hands-on, how-to policy and advocacy organization that designs and promotes model legislation and supports states with technical expertise, policy development, implementation strategies and public outreach.

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# Introduction: From Ideas to Implementation

Too many students are struggling to read proficiently, despite years of effort. However, these outcomes are often the result of instructional approaches that are not tied to the latest evidence.

Decades of research known as the science of reading clearly explain how children learn to read and what instruction is most effective at this task. In simple terms, this includes helping students hear and recognize the sounds in words, connect those sounds to letters, decode and read words accurately, build vocabulary, read fluently and understand what they read. The challenge is no longer knowing what works, but rather in ensuring that every classroom is using the science of reading and implementing it consistently.

Across the country, states are developing **comprehensive early literacy** policies. These systems align policy, instruction and support so that all students have access to the tools to become proficient, successful readers.

A strong early literacy policy includes four essential pillars:

## 1. Teacher Preparation and Support

Teachers are equipped with the knowledge and tools to deliver instruction based on the science of reading.

## 2. Assessment and Parent Communication

Students are screened early and often, and families are kept informed and engaged throughout the process.

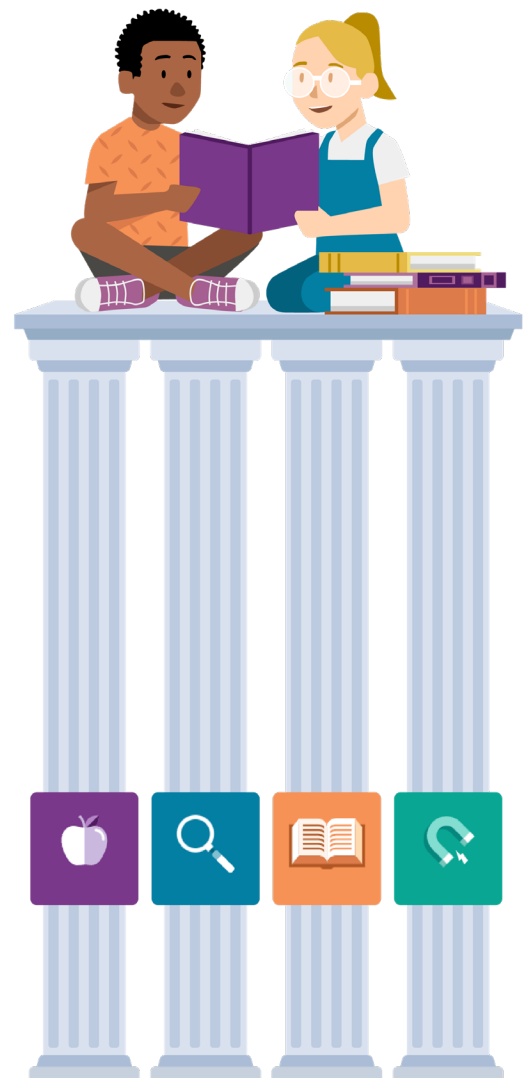
## 3. Instruction and Intervention

All students receive high-quality instruction with targeted support when needed.

## 4. Promotion and Retention Policies

Students are supported to reach proficiency, with retention used only as a last resort alongside other interventions.

These pillars working together create an environment where every student has the opportunity to succeed at reading.



# Key Messages and Talking Points

## Comprehensive Policy is Key

Success in reading outcomes requires a systematic approach in policy, not piecemeal initiatives. In Missouri, continued progress depends on strong policy implementation that ensures consistency across DESE and all LEAs.

Comprehensive literacy policy must include the following pillars:

- Teacher supports
- Assessment and parent notification
- Instruction and intervention
- Promotion and retention policies

→ **KEY MESSAGING TAKEAWAY:** “Early literacy success is built on a comprehensive system, not standalone initiatives.”

## Teacher Preparation and Support are Fundamental

Many teachers are not adequately prepared to teach reading without training in evidence-based instruction. Missouri’s efforts emphasize equipping educators with science of reading knowledge and skills, alongside supports following teacher training.

The state must ensure:

- Teacher training aligned to the science of reading
- Ongoing professional development and continued coaching

→ **KEY MESSAGING TAKEAWAY:** “Strong literacy outcomes start with well-prepared and thoroughly supported teachers.”

## Early Screening Provides a Pivotal First Signal

Literacy screening provides an early warning system for reading difficulties among students.

In Missouri, strengthening universal screening and data use is key to guiding better instruction and intervention practices.

Screening allows educators to:

- Identify struggling readers early
- Tailor instruction and provide intervention to get students back on track

→ **KEY MESSAGING TAKEAWAY:** “Early identification of reading struggles leads to earlier, more effective student support.”

## Instruction Must be Evidence-Based and Supported by High-Quality Instructional Materials

Students should have access to:

- Literacy instruction based on the science of reading
- High-Quality Instructional Materials

Missouri’s work includes building a common instructional language and supporting both the adoption and use of aligned materials across districts.

Students should have access to:

- Prevent reading difficulties
- Support struggling readers

→ **KEY MESSAGING TAKEAWAY:** “Instruction and the materials that support it are the main drivers of positive student outcomes.”

# Key Messages and Talking Points *(continued)*

## Intervention Must Be a Core Element of the System

Missouri's efforts emphasize early identification of reading difficulties and strong Tier 1 instruction as the foundation for prevention and targeted interventions. The state is also focused on equipping educators with science of reading knowledge and skills to better meet student needs.

Schools must provide:

- Targeted support for struggling readers
- Resources and defined structures for intervention purposes

→ **KEY MESSAGING TAKEAWAY:** "Struggling readers need timely, structured interventions, not delayed solutions."

## Retention Is a Last Resort

Retention is used only for students who are:

- Severely below grade level

It must be paired with:

- Intensive intervention
- High-quality instruction for an additional year with a highly effective teacher

→ **KEY MESSAGING TAKEAWAY:** "Retention is not a solution by itself. Increased support and high-quality instruction are."

## Early Literacy Policy Must Connect to Implementation

Many states have adopted policies, but not all have seen results. Missouri's most recent discussions emphasize the need to move from policy adoption to consistent classroom implementation.

The difference is the quality of the policy implementation

The goal is to move from:

- Policy adoption ▶ classroom practice

→ **KEY MESSAGING TAKEAWAY:** "Policy matters when its connected to what happens in classrooms."

## Early Literacy Is a Solvable Challenge

In Missouri, the opportunity is to build on existing efforts with better alignment, inter- and intra-agency communication and implementation.

- The necessary research and policy tools exist to drive change
- The issue is not a lack of solutions, but rather inconsistent implementation on those that exist

→ **KEY MESSAGING TAKEAWAY:** "We know what works. The focus must be on implementing well and at scale."

# Key Messages and Talking Points *(continued)*

## Early Literacy Informs Long-Term Outcomes

Effective policy implementation in Missouri requires both clear and consistent communication across all levels of the education system.

Students struggling to read early on encounter:

- Academic challenges across their school career
- Long-term economic and life impacts

Strong early literacy policy improves:

- Graduation rates
- Workforce readiness

→ **KEY MESSAGING TAKEAWAY:** “Early literacy is the foundation for lifelong learning and success.”

## States Need to Understand Their Progress

Missouri is exploring tools such as data dashboards and strategy scorecards to improve transparency and decision-making.

Policy adoption + implementation tracking is vital

State leaders must understand:

- Where they are
- What gaps remain

→ **KEY MESSAGING TAKEAWAY:** “You can’t improve what you don’t measure.”

# Audience-Specific Messaging

## Parents

Your child's reading success depends on the quality of instruction they receive.

Ask your school:

- Is reading instruction based on the science of reading?
- How are struggling readers identified and supported?

**Early reading support is critical and interventions are highly effective.**

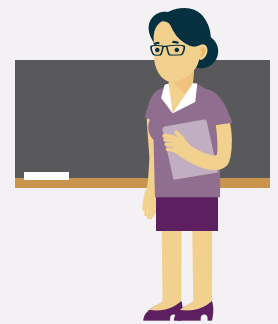


## Educators

You deserve access to:

- High-quality instructional materials
- Training aligned to how students actually learn to read
- Ongoing coaching, support and professional development opportunities

**Strong literacy systems make effective teaching possible and provide students with the opportunity for improvement.**



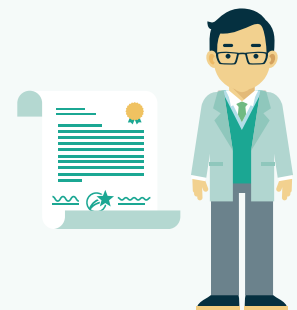
## Policymakers

Literacy reform requires system-wide alignment versus piecemeal programs.

Missouri's priorities include:

- Teacher preparation and licensure
- Curriculum quality
- Screening and intervention requirements
- Transparent data and accountability

**The objective of policy is coherence in early literacy structures.**

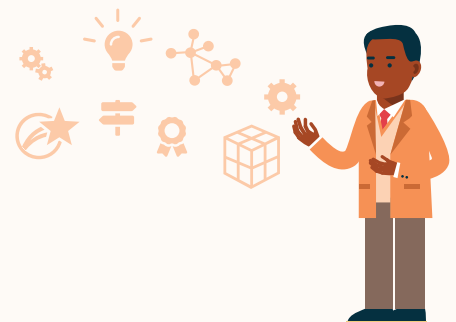


## State Education Chiefs

Sustainable literacy improvement requires:

- Clear statewide expectations
- Investment in teacher capacity and career development
- Alignment across agencies and institutions

**States that lead in literacy focus on implementation at scale.**



# Op-Ed Example

Op-eds are powerful ways to reach the local community. Use the example below as inspiration or a format template.

## We Know How to Teach Reading. Now We Must Deliver It

Improving reading outcomes among students has been considered one of education's most persistent challenges. However, we now have decades of research named the science of reading, which is an evidence-based approach to literacy that has roots in disciplines spanning psychology to neuroscience. This framework gives us a clear guide to how children learn to read and how to prepare instruction for the most effective outcomes.

The question is no longer what works? The question is whether we are consistently putting our knowledge of what does work into practice in classrooms.

Too many students are unable to reach reading proficiency by the end of third grade. This is not just a reading issue. Rather, it creates a barrier to success across all subjects and throughout school. A student who struggles to read will have difficulties accessing knowledge in math, science, history and literature.

States from across the country are demonstrating that when schools align classroom practice with the science of reading, student outcomes improve. Mississippi offers one of the clearest examples. Over the past decade, the state moved from near the bottom nationally in reading to among the top states for growth, ranking first in the nation for fourth grade reading gains since 2013.

A comprehensive early literacy approach including screening, targeted intervention, teacher supports and a focus on foundational reading skills contributed directly to this immense progress over time.

However, it is important to note that success does not belong to a single initiative. It comes from implementing a comprehensive approach that supports students at every stage of learning to read.

Reading must start with great teachers, equipped with science of reading-based training, and continued support and coaching. Ensuring that teachers have all of the tools to engage in meaningful reading instruction is one of the most important first steps we can take.

Additionally, early and frequent assessment is necessary for long-term reading improvement. Screening students in the early grades allows educators to identify reading difficulties before they become long-term challenges. When schools can identify where students are struggling, they can provide target support to address specific skills gaps.

Another critical piece to early reading success is high-quality instructional materials. When materials are aligned with evidence-based practices, they help to ensure that all students receive consistent, effective instruction.

Inevitably, there will be students who fall behind. In these cases, intervention must be immediate and focused. With the right support, to include additional instructional time, small group learning and progress monitoring, most students can get back on track.

It's also important to note that some policies include retention as a last resort for students who are significantly behind. But retention alone is not the solution; what matters is the quality and intensity of support students receive during this time to reach proficiency.

Ultimately, early literacy policy is about ensuring that every part of the literacy system, from teacher preparation to curriculum to assessment and intervention is aligned and working together, across all schools and all classrooms.

We have the tools, the research and the state exemplars to begin making real progress on early literacy. The task ahead of is clear: every classroom must deliver reading instruction that provides every child with the opportunity to become a strong reader.

When students learn to read, they gain access to the full promise of their education and all future opportunities that come with it.

## Myths vs. Facts

**MYTH:** All reading instruction approaches are equally effective.

**FACT:** Research clearly supports structured, explicit instruction in foundational skills.

**MYTH:** Students will catch up over time.

**FACT:** Without early, targeted intervention, reading gaps widen significantly.

**MYTH:** Balanced literacy and three-cueing are effective strategies.

**FACT:** These approaches rely on guessing strategies and are not aligned to how the brain learns to read.

**MYTH:** Screening labels students.

**FACT:** Screening identifies needs early so students can receive the support they need to succeed in the long term.

**MYTH:** Retention improves reading outcomes on its own.


**FACT:** Retention only works when paired with intensive, high-quality instruction and support.

**MYTH:** Reading ability is mostly determined by student background.

**FACT:** Instruction is the most powerful factor. When taught using evidence-based methods, most students can learn to read proficiently.

# Social Media Messaging



**Jane Doe**   
@JanDo


We know how kids learn to read. The question is: are we teaching it that way?  
[#ScienceOfReading](#)



**Don Smith**   
@DSmith87

Reading doesn't come naturally, it's taught.  
Let's make sure every classroom uses what works.  
[#ScienceOfReading](#)



**Sharron Bush**   
@SharronB444

Strong readers aren't born, they're taught through evidence-based instruction.  
[#EvidenceBasedInstruction](#)



**Sara Richardson**   
@SaraRich72

Early screening ▶ early support ▶ better outcomes  
[#LiteracyScreening](#)



**John Jones**   
@Johj022

Curriculum matters. Instruction matters. Implementation matters.  
[#EarlyLiteracyMatters](#)



**Denise Williams**   
@DeniW88

It's not about students trying harder. It's about teaching smarter.  
[#TeacherLiteracyTraining](#)



**Harold Ross**   
@HaroldRoss8843

Every child deserves access to reading instruction that works.  
[#HQIM](#)

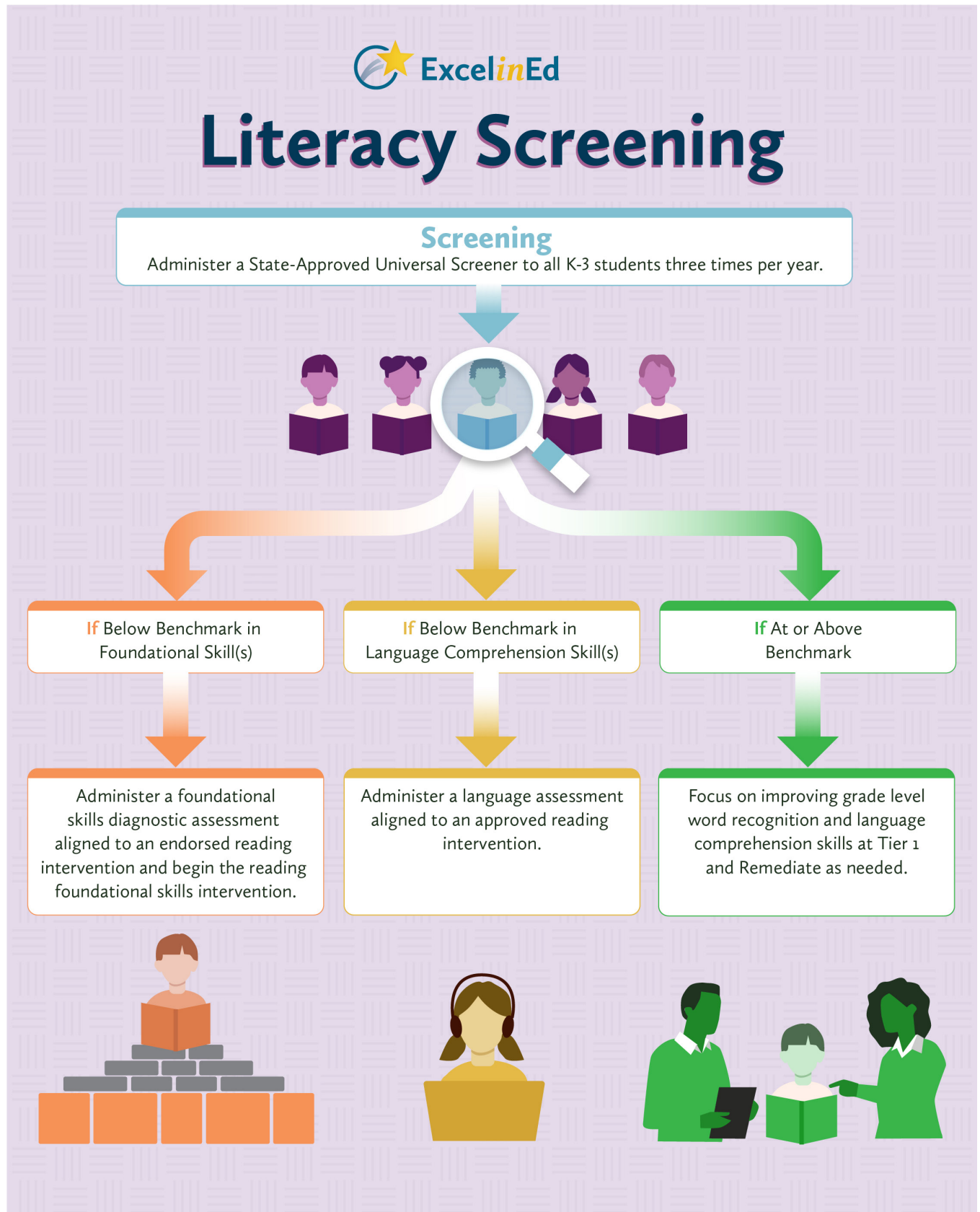
# Infographics

1. Copy image to clipboard.
2. Paste and share via social media.



# Infographics (continued)

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## Effective Literacy Instruction

### Teacher Knowledge



### Explicit & Systematic Instruction



### Differentiated Instruction



### Frequent Practice / Feedback



### Use of High-Quality Instructional Materials

A - B - C - D - E - F - G - H - I - J - K - L - M - N - O - P - Q - R - S - T - U - V - W - X - Y - Z



# Infographics (continued)

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## Literacy Myth vs. Fact

<p><b>MYTH</b></p> <p>All reading instruction approaches are equally effective.</p> <p><b>FACT</b></p> <p>Research clearly supports structured, explicit instruction in foundational skills.</p>	<p><b>MYTH</b></p> <p>Screening labels students.</p> <p><b>FACT</b></p> <p>Screening identifies needs early so students can receive the support they need to succeed in the long term.</p>
<p><b>MYTH</b></p> <p>Retention improves reading outcomes on its own.</p> <p><b>FACT</b></p> <p>Retention only works when paired with intensive, high-quality instruction and support.</p>	<p><b>MYTH</b></p> <p>Students will catch up over time.</p> <p><b>FACT</b></p> <p>Without early, targeted intervention, reading gaps widen significantly.</p>
<p><b>MYTH</b></p> <p>Balanced literacy and three-cueing are effective strategies.</p> <p><b>FACT</b></p> <p>These approaches rely on guessing strategies and are not aligned to how the brain learns to read.</p>	<p><b>MYTH</b></p> <p>Reading ability is mostly determined by student background.</p> <p><b>FACT</b></p> <p>Instruction is the most powerful factor. When taught using evidence-based methods, most students can learn to read proficiently.</p>