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Sounding it Out: Building Blocks for Strong Literacy Programs

Lessons from Four Philadelphia
Literacy Pilot Programs Moving
Students from Phonics to Fluency

Introduction



Every child who learns to read is supported by a team that guides them step by step and cheers them on along the way. This team often includes family members, educators, peers, and community members. Those who support young readers understand that literacy unlocks academic potential and improves life outcomes. However, research also shows that reading is not a natural or intuitive process for humans.¹ Reading is a relatively recent human skill, only 5,000 years old,² and is not hard-wired into our brains as spoken language is. Because of this, reading can be a profound struggle for many young learners, even with strong support at home and in the classroom.

Literacy support programs are a key intervention for children who are struggling to develop reading fluency. These programs supplement instructional time during the school day or out of school. Extensive research supports the effectiveness of such programs. This evidence—combined with declining literacy proficiency rates nationwide—has prompted increased interest in literacy support, particularly in under-resourced communities where students face the greatest barriers to thriving. The need is significant: in 2024, only 30% of U.S. 4th graders read on grade level. Reading proficiency remains an equity priority, as children from economically disadvantaged, Black, and Latino communities too often lack access to effective literacy instruction. Targeted, supplementary literacy instruction via a support program is one of the best-known approaches to move the needle for young readers.

This report captures promising practices and lessons learned from an implementation evaluation of four literacy support programs during their first years of operation (2022–2025). The programs collectively served 2,272 students in Philadelphia over three years, an average of 757 students per year. On average, participants in all programs demonstrated reading gains. As would be expected for pilot programs, each made annual adjustments to its model and learned along the way.

Findings emerged from a thematic analysis and synthesis of common successes and challenges across programs during early implementation. We refined these findings through interviews with program leaders (one to two per program), who provided feedback, contextualized results, and helped ensure the evaluation would be useful to other practitioners and decision makers. See the Appendix for additional information about methods.

This report offers insights and practical guidance for literacy support programs, particularly those in their pilot stages. Given critically low rates of grade-level reading in both Philadelphia and across the nation, expanding and strengthening these programs is an important opportunity for schools to cultivate confident, proficient readers.

¹ Liberman, I. Y., Shankweiler, D., & Liberman, A. M. (1989). The alphabetic principle and learning to read.

² Robinson, A. (2009). *Writing and script: a very short introduction* (Vol. 208). Oxford University Press.

³ Nickow, A. J., Oreopoulos, P., & Quan, V. (2020). The transformative potential of tutoring for PreK-12 learning outcomes: Lessons from randomized evaluations.

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2024). "2024 Reading Trial Urban District

Snapshot Report." U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2009–2024 Reading Assessments. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/dst2024/pdf/2024220XP4.pdf>

Limitations

The claims in this report are primarily derived from interview and observation data, not literacy outcome data. We therefore do not demonstrate that the promising practices presented here are causally connected to student reading gains. Although, as noted, all programs saw average reading gains, the evaluation design did not isolate whether gains were directly attributable to the programs or influenced by other factors. Two major barriers to making causal claims connected to student reading data were: (1) a causal study is generally not a wise investment for a pilot program that is likely to change rapidly; and (2) programs used different assessments to measure reading progress (sometimes multiple assessments within the same program), which were not comparable, making cross-program comparisons infeasible with available data.

Promising Practices for Literacy Support Programs

Launching a successful literacy support program is a significant undertaking that takes dedication, relationship-building, organization, and a growth mindset. Below, we summarize promising practices that surfaced repeatedly across three years of work with program leaders and instructors as programs moved from launch to full operation.

We identified three key areas of promising practices:

- **Program structures and resources:** Design elements within a program's direct control.
- **Student well-being:** Practices that support student enjoyment and flourishing
- **Infrastructure supports:** External conditions programs may not fully control but can influence through advocacy, especially for programs partnering with or co-locating in schools.

Promising Practices for Literacy Support Programs

The promising practices are listed in the following table, along with key components that programs recommended to ensure effectiveness.

	Promising practice	Key components
	Program supports and resources	
1	Structured literacy curriculum with instructor flexibility	• Structured curriculum aligned to science of reading • Multisensory activities • Instructor flexibility
2	Regular assessments	• Regular (usually weekly) progress monitoring • Pre- and post-assessments to understand growth
3	Leveled groups/pairs	• Groups of students working on similar skills • Groups of 2-4 students, if possible • Mid-program regrouping as students grow
4	Ongoing instructor training	• Preservice training focusing on program practices • Ongoing training and coaching that supports individualized needs
	Student well-being	
5	Student joy and engagement	• Multisensory activities • Time spent getting to know students
6	Behavior management support systems	• Ongoing behavior management training • Options for behavior management systems
	Infrastructure supports	
7	Strong relationships with partner schools	• Designated point person at each school • Regularly scheduled meeting(s) with school administrators • Teacher communication plan • Goals to retain school partners year-over-year
8	Predictable instruction schedules	• Plan for half days, assemblies, field trips, and other interruptions • Plan for student absences
9	Adequate facilities and supplies	• Dedicated, quiet space • Storage • Walls or easels for instructional displays • Child-appropriate furniture

What It Looks Like In Practice

Descriptions and examples of each promising practice are detailed below. Programs implemented the promising practices in many ways, and the examples highlighted are merely some of the ways the practice could be implemented in a successful program.

Program supports and resources

1



Structured literacy curriculum with instructor flexibility

Programs experienced the most success when instructors had clear, detailed guidance aligned with the science of reading and the flexibility to meet emergent student needs. All programs supplied a structured literacy curriculum—sequenced and explicit—to show students how to sound out words, recognize patterns, and build toward fluent reading. Within this structure, some programs invited more experienced instructors to deviate from planned lessons to address student needs. Instructors reported that this balance of structure and autonomy supported their students effectively.

2



Regular assessments

All programs used assessments to track progress and guide instruction. Programs administered frequent (often weekly) progress monitoring and pre/post assessments to understand growth over the year. Multiple programs used DIBELS to quickly assess students, determine groupings, and guide instruction. For additional information about assessments for literacy support programs, see RFA's practice guide on the topic.

3



Leveled groups/pairs

Programs grouped students by similar skill needs, with groups of 2–4 students proving particularly effective for small-group instruction. Regrouping mid-program was often necessary based on progress and student fit. One program asked instructors to work with pairs of students who were grouped using reading assessment data and input from school personnel. The small size of these groups ensured additional attention. If pairing students is not possible, one program learned that capping groups at four students proved most effective. A leader from this program shared that groups of four or fewer students “really correlated with lessening behavior issues.”

4



Ongoing instructor training

All programs provided both pre-service and ongoing training for instructors. Although this time could be difficult to carve out, it was important for instructors to have dedicated time to onboard to the program and then receive training at regular checkpoints throughout the year. One program developed a 65-page implementation guide covering core reading components, program logistics, and

suggested activities; this was paired with pre-service training and ongoing professional development. For additional information about training within literacy support programs, see RFA's Practice Guide on the topic.

Student well-being

5



Student joy and engagement

Programs foregrounded student enjoyment. Instructors were welcoming and took time to get to know students. Many of the literacy activities were multisensory and included engaging elements such as songs, games, manipulatives, pictures, colors, and movement. For example, program instructors incorporated music, movement, and hands-on activities into their lessons. One program leader emphasized that this approach is not just effective to keep students attentive, it is research-based. Their program materials read “Literacy should be FUN and EXCITING!” Instructors also infused joy and care into their lessons by deviating from the script regularly to learn more about their students and listen to what they had to say. This approach helped maintain a visibly positive and fun environment for students outside of the planned activities.

6



Behavior management support systems

All but the most experienced instructors expressed needing regular or occasional help with behavior management. Programs provided upfront training and optional tools (e.g., developing a teacher voice, sticker charts, and positive attention-getting strategies) and offered ongoing individualized coaching. One leader noted that hands-on coaching is essential, as behavior management is difficult to learn without direct practice. Another program reduced behavior challenges by hiring experienced instructors.

Infrastructure supports

7



Strong relationships with partner schools

For school-based or co-located programs, strong relationships with school staff were a key success factor. Programs planned regular communications with both school leaders (to plan logistics) and classroom teachers (to communicate about student progress). One program designated a single point-person at each school (typically an administrator such as an assistant principal). This person was looped into all program communications about the school and helped plan key logistics, such as scheduling and facilities use. Program

staff also scheduled regular meetings, ideally weekly, with the school-based point-person. The meeting agenda typically focused on student data and emerging challenges. Another program emphasized the importance of long-term relationships with schools because they found that after working at schools multiple years “there’s so much more trust and excitement for us to be there.”

8

Predictable instruction schedules

Competing priorities—other programs, school events, and school closures—frequently disrupted schedules.



Program leaders learned to navigate these challenges by having a clear plan for half days, assemblies, and student absences. One program created a protocol to ensure students received the same number of weekly sessions despite interruptions (such as a holiday, half-day, or fire drill). The protocol ensures that all students are seen the same number of times in a week, regardless of whether a planned or unplanned interruption causes a conflict with their regularly occurring instruction time.

9

Adequate facilities and supplies

Facilities, furniture, and supplies shaped early implementation.



Instructors had the most success in dedicated, quiet spaces with appropriate furniture and storage. Storage space is required for the variety of materials used to work on lessons. Useful materials included anchor charts, handheld individual white boards, markers, stickers, worksheets, and flash cards. One program designed a literacy classroom with flexible spaces for large groups, small groups, and independent work, including an inviting clawfoot porcelain tub filled with pillows for cozy independent reading. Programs with less control over their facilities worked closely with school personnel to arrange spaces that were quiet (ideally, with a door that closes to keep out noise) and had appropriate furniture (such as a low table and child-sized chairs for small group instruction). Programs made flexible use of available space (e.g., rugs, movement areas, small-group tables).



Recommendations

The three-year evaluation of four literacy pilot programs demonstrates the potential for well-designed, evidence-based interventions to support Philadelphia's youngest readers. Across sites, RFA observed strong implementation of structured literacy practices and consistent student engagement. The following recommendations summarize key lessons for programs, schools, and funders to strengthen and scale the city's early literacy efforts.

For Programs

1. **Deepen instructional consistency and dosage.** Programs should continue refining schedules and instructional models to ensure students receive adequate time in literacy intervention. The programs saw strong skill gains among students with regular attendance and sufficient exposure, suggesting that sustained contact time is a condition for student growth.
2. **Integrate culturally responsive and motivational literacy practices.** Across programs, staff expressed a desire to better connect foundational literacy instruction with students' cultural and linguistic identities. Programs can build on their structured literacy models by incorporating texts, visuals, and enrichment activities that affirm students' experiences and nurture joy in reading.
3. **Continue strengthening professional learning and peer collaboration.** Programs benefited from regular coaching and professional development, particularly when it focused on practical implementation of the Science of Reading. Cross-program learning opportunities, such as joint workshops or site visits, could promote shared improvement and reduce duplication of effort.

For Schools

1. **Prioritize dedicated instructional spaces and scheduling support.** Program quality was highest in schools that provided stable instructional environments with ample supplies. School leaders can maximize program impact by allocating consistent space and scheduling blocks for small-group instruction.
2. **Embed tutoring and intervention within a school-wide literacy strategy.** Schools that aligned program activities with their core literacy goals experienced smoother collaboration and more coherent instruction. Administrators can strengthen these partnerships by aligning assessment tools, pacing guides, and professional learning calendars with program staff.

- 3. Build stronger communication channels between school staff and program instructors.** Frequent coordination meetings and shared student progress tools helped streamline intervention efforts. Expanding these practices can enhance data transparency and collective ownership of student progress.

For Funders and System Leaders

- 1. Support stable staffing and training pipelines.** Instructor retention and training remain central to program quality. Funders can sustain gains by investing in long-term pipelines for literacy specialists and instructors, including shared onboarding modules, cross-organization coaching, and stipends for advanced certification.
- 2. Invest in data capacity and common metrics.** Summarizing program-wide reading growth was one of the more valuable components of RFA's evaluation. Programs now need support understanding reading growth across their program models (in many instances, programs offered different structures with different levels of support) and to understand reading growth in comparison to similar, non-participating students.
- 3. Encourage coordination across program models.** The pilots collectively demonstrate that multiple pathways, including school-day tutoring, working with reading specialists, and afterschool literacy enrichment, can all play complementary roles in supporting citywide literacy. If they don't already, funders can consider convening literacy programs to exchange data, align promising practices, and identify opportunities for shared implementation supports (e.g., curriculum materials, family engagement strategies).
- 4. Plan for long-term sustainability and scale.** As pilots move beyond early implementation, sustained funding and integration into district and community infrastructure will be essential. Once models are fully solidified, impact evaluations can validate effectiveness and inform scale.

Summary

Together, these actions can help Philadelphia's literacy partners build on early successes to deliver more equitable, engaging, and coherent reading support for young learners. Sustaining and scaling these efforts will require coordinated investment in people, infrastructure, and data systems, ensuring that every child has access to the evidence-based instruction and relational supports needed to thrive as a reader.

Appendix: Evaluation Data Collection

The conclusions in this report draw on the evaluation of four programs for three years, including the following sources of data:

Four Programs	Evaluated four literacy support programs, including both in-school and out-of-school programs for three years, from 2022-25 (some programs were only evaluated for two years because that was the length of time they were funded by the William Penn Foundation)
Literature Review	Conducted a rapid review of evidence-based practices for literacy programs.
Document Reviews	Reviewed key program documents for each program.
Participation Data	Analyzed program participation data, such as number and hours of tutoring sessions.
Outcomes Data	Analyzed reading growth for all participating students.
Interview Data	Conducted 29 interviews with program instructors, program leaders, and school staff.
Observation Data	Conducted 16 program observations of literacy instruction sessions.

Feedback?

RFA is always learning more about literacy programs and what helps instructors and their students feel successful. If you have additional thoughts about key practices for literacy support programs, please reach out to RFA at klaparo@researchforaction.org.

About This Report

This report is one of several reports culminating from RFA's three-year evaluation of four pilot literacy programs in Philadelphia funded by the William Penn Foundation. This short, targeted report is intended to share specific learnings from the field that will be useful to literacy practitioners.

The data from this report is drawn from three years of outcomes evaluations for four programs, document reviews and literature reviews, as well as 29 interviews with program leaders, program instructors, and school personnel. Report findings were subjected to a final member-check interview with six program leaders to collect feedback, refine findings, and add detail.

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