

# REWRITING HOW READING IS TAUGHT: HOW THREE SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE CHANGING HOW STUDENTS LEARN TO READ

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fulton County Schools, Grady County Schools, and Marietta City Schools are transforming literacy instruction. Many students in these districts were not proficient readers by the end of third grade, a persistent trend worsened by the pandemic. Leaders in each district concluded they needed a new way of teaching reading: structured literacy. Structured literacy delivers explicit and systematic instruction in the five essential elements of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Replacing previous approaches to literacy instruction with a new and very different one is a significant undertaking. Each district developed and implemented a comprehensive plan to do so. Despite their differences in location, size, and student demographics, their reform approaches share seven common components:

***Leadership-driven focus on literacy:*** District leaders made improving literacy instruction a districtwide priority, developed a shared vision of effective literacy instruction, and worked with their leadership teams to implement systemic approaches to literacy reform.

***High-quality training for educators:*** Teachers, coaches, district and school leaders, and staff participated in intensive training in structured literacy. Districts also ensured educators had the time, tools, and resources to complete training.

***School-based coaches:*** Districts deployed school-based coaches who provided critical support to teachers as they mastered new knowledge, applied it in their classrooms, and used new instructional resources.

***Aligned instructional resources:*** Districts invested in new instructional resources that supported the transition to structured literacy strategies as well as developing their own resources.

***Enhanced district capacity to support school staff:*** Districts increased their ability to assist teachers, coaches, and other staff with implementing structured literacy strategies, including adding educators with literacy expertise.

***Data-driven instruction to meet student needs:*** Educators in each district used assessments data to monitor student learning and adjust instruction. They also provided targeted instruction to students who needed additional support or were ready to accelerate their learning.

***Sufficient funding:*** Federal pandemic relief funds and external grants enabled districts to implement comprehensive plans to reform literacy instruction. Without these funds, districts' plans would have included fewer supports for teachers, taken longer to implement, and had their impact diminished.

# CONSIDERATIONS FOR LITERACY REFORM FOR POLICYMAKERS

These three districts' experiences transforming literacy instruction point to key issues policymakers should consider as they pursue statewide literacy reform.

**Leadership:** Many district and school leaders are new and may not have knowledge about and experience leading systemic change and transforming literacy instruction.

- What training and support do school and district leaders need to understand structured literacy and lead systems change to implement it?
- How will this support be provided to them?
- What support structures can be created at the state level to guide effective and consistent district practices to implement and sustain structured literacy?

**Financial resources:** The loss of federal pandemic relief funds leaves a financial gap to support literacy reform and implementation of the Georgia Early Literacy Act.

- What resources do districts need to effectively implement and sustain structured literacy?
- Will additional resources be provided to districts?
- Without additional resources, how can the systemic reform model created by these districts be adapted without compromising its effectiveness?
- What is a feasible timeline for reform under an adapted model?

**Evaluation:** External evaluations can improve reform implementation and monitor its impact on students, but many districts do not have capacity to undertake them.

- What technical assistance can be provided to districts to help them evaluate the implementation and impact of reform strategies?
- How can the state assess the implementation and impact of literacy reform statewide to address emerging challenges, and identify and replicate effective practices?

**Educator workforce:** Recruiting and retaining educators is a statewide challenge that can undermine literacy reform.

- How can state policy improve teacher and leader retention?
- How can district and state leaders ensure literacy reform does not exacerbate local recruitment and retention challenges?

**Student poverty:** Structured literacy can shrink the literacy gap between poor and non-poor students, but challenges in high-poverty schools and districts persist, including high student mobility, teacher turnover, and high levels of novice teachers.

- How can state policy address student poverty to maximize the promise of structured literacy?
- What additional supports do high poverty districts need to implement and sustain structured literacy?