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# DISTRICT CASE STUDY

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REWRITING HOW  
READING IS TAUGHT

PREPARED BY THE  
Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education



Georgia Partnership  
FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION



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## PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Between March 2020 and March 2021, Georgia was awarded \$6.6 billion from the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund to operate schools safely during the Covid-19 pandemic and address students' academic and non-academic needs. The Georgia State Board of Education distributed 90% of these dollars (\$5.9 billion) to local school districts and state-approved charter schools — also called local education agencies or LEAs. These LEAs received significant flexibility to use ESSER funds to help mitigate the adverse impacts of the global pandemic, accelerate learning, and improve student well-being.

In August 2021, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) launched the CARES Impact Study, a multi-year research project designed to 1) understand how LEAs used ESSER funds; 2) identify best practices emerging from LEA efforts to accelerate student learning and foster student well-being; 3) and reveal common challenges LEAs have encountered as they carry out their plans.

Funded by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), the study has drawn on interviews with LEA leaders and other stakeholders and experts, as well as an annual survey of LEAs. Findings from previous surveys and interviews are available in the CARES Impact Study [Baseline Report](#), [Year-One Report](#), and [Year-Two Report](#).

In March 2024, GaDOE commissioned the Georgia Partnership to produce three case studies that identify promising practices in three areas: closing learning gaps, improving student well-being, and strengthening the educator workforce. This first case study focuses on closing learning gaps through literacy reform.

The Georgia Partnership continues to advance our mission to inform and engage leaders to positively impact education and workforce readiness. The examples detailed in this case study can inform and engage leaders at the state and local levels about Georgia's education challenges and provide them with solutions that could improve education and economic outcomes for all Georgians.



Dr. Dana Rickman  
President, Georgia Partnership For Excellence in Education

# 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?



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

Every child can learn to read well. This is the driving belief of visionary leaders transforming how reading is taught in three Georgia school districts: Fulton County Schools, Grady County Schools, and Marietta City Schools. Before the pandemic, many students in these districts were not skilled readers by the end of third grade, a critical milestone associated with future academic success, employment, and quality of life. Leaders in these districts recognized the problem was worsening and concluded that structured literacy was the most effective instructional approach to address low reading proficiency. Structured literacy delivers explicit and systematic instruction in the five essential elements of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

District leaders each designed comprehensive plans to implement structured literacy and developed intentional strategies to ensure educators received the training and support necessary to deliver instruction according to the science of reading (SOR), an evolving body of research on how children learn to read.<sup>1</sup> Their goal – ensuring all students become proficient readers – is simple to understand but difficult to accomplish in practice.

Leaders tapped federal pandemic relief funds and other grant sources to implement their plans. Their efforts have yielded promising results: the percentage of third grade students reaching the proficient level or above on the Georgia Milestones English Language Arts (ELA) exam climbed in these districts between 2022 and 2024. Fulton County and Marietta City Schools also surpassed their pre-pandemic achievement levels on the third grade ELA exam, with Grady County approaching the same benchmark.<sup>2</sup>

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1 National Center on Improving Literacy. (2022). The Science of Reading: The Basics. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs, National Center on Improving Literacy. Retrieved from <https://improvingliteracy.org/brief/science-reading-basics/index.html>

2 The Georgia Department of Education also reports students' lexile scores, which indicate whether they are reading on grade level. In the 2023-2024 school year, the percent of third graders reading on grade level was 72.8% in Fulton County, 58.1% in Grady County, and 68% in Marietta City Schools.

As part of its [CARES Impact Study](#), the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (“Georgia Partnership”) visited each of these districts to understand their approach to reforming literacy instruction. Despite their differences in size, student demographics, and location, seven consistent themes emerged across the reform approaches.

1. **Leadership-driven focus on literacy:** Leaders in each district made improving literacy instruction a districtwide priority. They developed a shared vision of effective literacy instruction and worked with their leadership teams to design and implement systemic approaches to literacy reform.
2. **High-quality training for educators:** Teachers, coaches, district and school leaders, and other instructional support staff participated in intensive training in structured literacy. Districts also ensured educators had the time, tools, and resources to complete training.
3. **School-based coaches:** Districts deployed school-based coaches whose guidance was critical in supporting teachers as they mastered new knowledge and applied it in their classrooms. Coaches also helped teachers use new instructional resources effectively.
4. **Aligned instructional resources:** Districts invested in new instructional resources that supported the transition to structured literacy strategies as well as developing their own resources.
5. **Enhanced district capacity to support school staff:** Districts increased their ability to assist teachers, coaches, and other school-level staff as they implemented sustainable structured literacy strategies. This included increasing the number of educators with expertise in literacy to assist and develop tools for teachers and coaches.
6. **Data-driven instruction to meet student needs:** Educators in each district used data gathered through frequent assessments to carefully monitor student learning and adjust instruction. They also provided targeted instruction to students who needed additional support or were ready to accelerate their learning.
7. **Sufficient funding:** Federal pandemic relief and external grant programs enabled districts to implement comprehensive plans to reform literacy instruction systemwide. Leaders would have moved forward with literacy reform without these funds, but their plans would have taken longer to implement and would not have included the full array of supports for educators they were able to put in place with these funds.



These districts pushed reform forward while balancing other issues that affect students and educators. They implemented new state standards in math in the 2023-2024 school year and are preparing to implement new ELA standards in the 2025-2026 school year. They face challenges recruiting and retaining teachers. Student mental health needs and absenteeism remain high. All of these issues are important, and all require significant staff, time, and resources. District leaders across Georgia as well as state leaders will determine how to address these critical issues while also moving forward with literacy reform, which is now a state priority.

In 2023, state legislators passed the Georgia Early Literacy Act, which requires districts to take steps to improve literacy instruction. The stories of Fulton County Schools, Grady County Schools, and Marietta City Schools offer insights district and state education leaders can use to implement the act's requirements. As educators from the classroom to central office in these three districts assert, their work is not done. They continue to refine and strengthen the instructional practices they put in place at the elementary level, where they began this work, and are extending their focus to other student groups.

The reform approaches these three districts designed and their experiences implementing them highlight issues for state and districts leaders to consider as they now pursue effective and sustainable literacy reform.

**Leadership:** With significant turnover among superintendents, principals and other leaders, many leaders are new and may not have in-depth knowledge about and experience leading systemic change and transforming literacy instruction.

- What training and support do leaders at the school and district levels 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:** Federal pandemic relief funds supported much of the literacy reforms in these districts. These funds expired, leaving a financial gap to support literacy reform and the 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?
- In the absence of additional resources, can the systemic reform model created by these districts be adapted without compromising effectiveness? If so, how and what is a feasible timeline for reform under an adapted model?

**Evaluation:** Fulton County Schools and Marietta City Schools used external evaluations to improve reform implementation and monitor its impact on students. Many districts do not have comparable capacity to carry out external evaluations.

- 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:** A skilled and stable educator workforce is a significant asset to implementing and sustaining literacy reform, but recruiting and retaining educators is a common challenge across districts.

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

**Student poverty:** Low-income students are less likely to be proficient readers in third grade than their non-poor peers.<sup>3</sup> Structured literacy can shrink the literacy gap between poor and non-poor students, but challenges in high-poverty schools and districts persist,

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3 Governor's Office of Student Achievement. (n.d.) Direct Certification: Measuring Student Poverty.

including high student mobility, teacher turnover, and high percentages of novice teachers.

- Many of the districts with the greatest literacy challenges also have high poverty rates. 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?

## **METHODOLOGY**

Georgia Partnership staff solicited recommendations for districts that have been at the forefront of reforming literacy instruction from literacy experts across Georgia, district leaders, Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) staff, nonprofit leaders, and other stakeholders who are knowledgeable observers of reading reform in the state. These people recommended multiple districts, reflecting the significant work underway around the state to improve literacy outcomes for students. Fulton County Schools, Grady County Schools, and Marietta City Schools received multiple recommendations, which were supported by information gathered about the reforms each district was pursuing.

The superintendents in each district were invited to participate in this project, and each agreed. Georgia Partnership staff visited each district in spring 2024 and interviewed teachers, coaches, principals, district leaders and other educators to learn about their reform approaches. Staff also reviewed publicly available information about the districts' data, reform strategies, and research on literacy instruction.

Educators in these districts generously gave their time and knowledge to this project, enabling the Georgia Partnership to learn about and share their literacy journeys with communities across the state.

## DISTRICT SNAPSHOTS

Fulton County Schools, Grady County Schools, and Marietta City Schools vary in size and location. Fulton County Schools is the fourth largest district in the state, and sprawls more than 70 miles from north to south, separated by the City of Atlanta. Metro Atlanta is also home to Marietta City Schools, which serves one of the largest suburban communities in the area and sits within Cobb County. Grady County is a rural community in southwest Georgia, with a rich history in agriculture and natural resources that continues today. Each is home to diverse communities with different strengths and opportunities. Each district also supports a significant portion of economically disadvantaged students, a risk factor for low achievement in reading.

### ***Fulton County Schools***

District Context

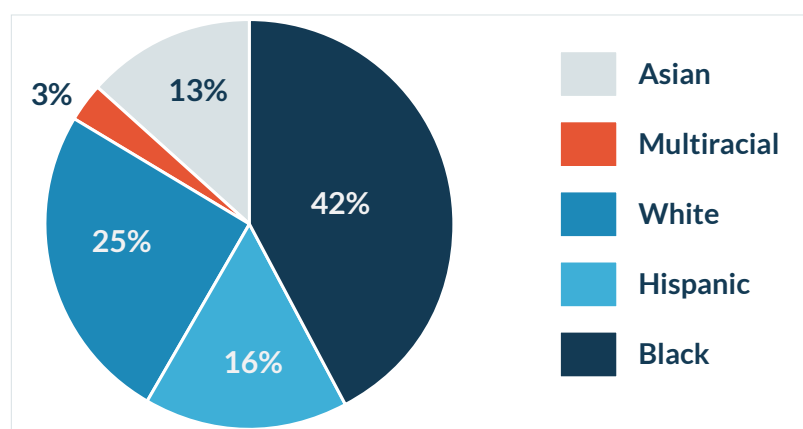
Full-time equivalent student enrollment: 87,971

Number of schools: 104

Economically disadvantaged students: 44%

Special education: 10.4%

ESOL students: 6.7%



### ***Grady Snapshot***

#### District Context

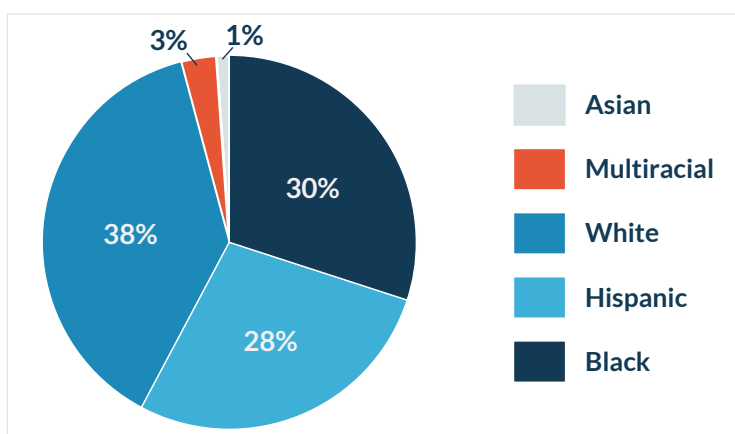
Full-time equivalent student enrollment: 4,470

Number of schools: 7

Economically disadvantaged students: 100%

Special education students: 10.7%

ESOL students: 12.3%



### ***Marietta City Snapshot***

#### District Context

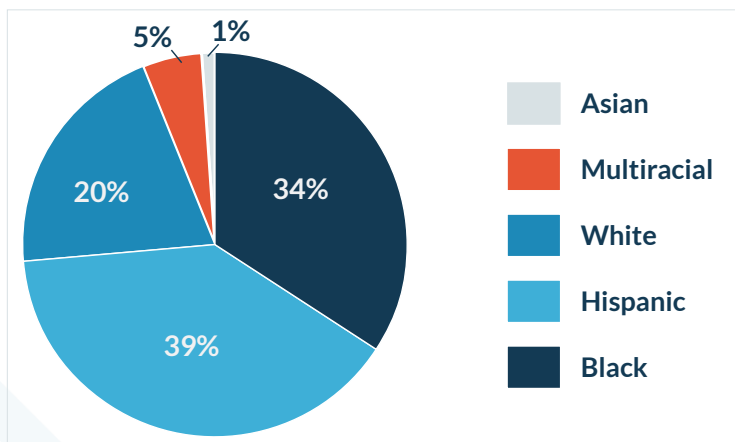
Full-time equivalent student enrollment: 8,292

Number of schools: 12

Economically disadvantaged students: 62%

Special education students: 11%

ESOL students: 18%



## SETTING THE STAGE FOR READING REFORM

The instructional approaches for literacy, or how kids are taught to read, have been the subject of fierce debate in the education community and have shifted over time. In the 1990s, the argument was between whole language, which emphasized exposure to reading and comprehension, and phonics- or skills-based instruction, which focused first on phonics instruction followed by reading and comprehension.<sup>4</sup>

The National Reading Panel, a group of literacy experts convened by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development at the direction of Congress, aimed to settle the debate. In 2000, after an extensive review of research, the panel identified five essential elements of reading instruction:

1. Phonemic awareness: The ability to hear and play with individual sounds in spoken words.
2. Phonics: Understanding how letters and groups of letters link to sounds to form letter-sound relationships and spelling patterns.
3. Fluency: The ability to read words, phrases, sentences, and stories with enough speed and expression.
4. Vocabulary: Knowing what words mean and how to say and use them correctly.
5. Comprehension: The ability to understand what you are reading.<sup>5</sup>

These elements can be taught in different ways, though the panel recommended systematic and explicit instruction.<sup>6</sup> Systematic instruction is “a planned sequence that

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4 Manzo, K.K. (1999, March 17). Whole-language model survives despite swing back to basics. *Education Week*, 18(27). <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/whole-language-model-survives-despite-swing-back-to-basics/1999/03>

5 National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS. (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: Reports of the Subgroups (00-4754). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; National Center on Improving Literacy (n.d.) The 5 Big Ideas of Beginning Reading. <https://www.improvingliteracy.org/code-assets/briefs/five-big-ideas-beginning-reading.png>

6 Learning Point Associates. (2004). A Closer Look at the Five Essential Components of Effective Reading Instruction: A Review of Scientifically Based Reading Research for Teachers. Learning Points Associates: Naperville, IL. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED512569.pdf>



includes a logical progression of content, concepts and skills, from simple to complex.”<sup>7</sup> Explicit instruction is “intentional teaching with a clear and direct presentation of new information to learners.”<sup>8</sup> Taken together, systematic and explicit instruction became known as structured literacy.<sup>9</sup>

Districts across the country were encouraged to adopt the panel’s recommendations through Reading First, a federal grant program. Georgia received over \$200 million between 2002 and 2008 to help schools implement the essential elements, provide comprehensive professional development, and sustain effective practices through literacy coaching.<sup>10</sup> Though Georgia saw reading gains, a national evaluation of Reading First yielded uncertain results, and federal funding for the program was eliminated.<sup>11</sup>

An alternative approach emerged, balanced literacy, which was viewed as combining the strengths of whole language and phonics-based instruction. It became widely used in Georgia, including Fulton County, Grady County and Marietta City, as well as nationally. In practice, however, phonics instruction was often limited under balanced literacy and was not explicit or systematic.<sup>12</sup>

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7 Florida Center for Reading Research (n.d.) Florida Practice Profiles. <https://fcrr.org/educators/florida-practice-profiles>

8 Florida Center for Reading Research (n.d.) Florida Practice Profiles. <https://fcrr.org/educators/florida-practice-profiles>

9 Spear-Swerling, L. (2019, June). Here’s Why Schools Should Use Structured Literacy. International Dyslexia Association. [https://dyslexiaida.org/heres-why-schools-should-use-structured-literacy/#:~:text=What%20Is%20Structured%20Literacy%3F,reading%20comprehension%2C%20written%20expression\).](https://dyslexiaida.org/heres-why-schools-should-use-structured-literacy/#:~:text=What%20Is%20Structured%20Literacy%3F,reading%20comprehension%2C%20written%20expression).)

10 U.S. Department of Education. (2011). Reading First Implementation Study 2008-09: Final Report. <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/other/reading-first-implementation-study/report.pdf>; Deloitte. (2023). The State of Literacy in Georgia.

11 Kennedy Manzo, K. (2008, May 1). Reading first doesn’t help students “get it.” Education Week, 27 <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/reading-first-doesnt-help-pupils-get-it/2008/05>

12 Diegmueeller, K. (1996, March 20). The best of both worlds. Education Week, 7(8). <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/the-best-of-both-worlds/1996/03>; Schwartz, S. (2019, December 3). The most popular reading programs aren’t back by science. Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/the-most-popular-reading-programs-arent-backed-by-science/2019/12>

Many students do not need explicit and systematic instruction and learned to read under balanced literacy.<sup>13</sup> However, many students have the opposite experience. Approximately 30 to 40 percent of students need systematic and explicit instruction in the five elements to learn to read, and additional students need this instruction to move from basic reading skills to proficiency. Leaders in Fulton and Grady County Schools and Marietta City Schools recognized they needed to change how literacy is taught.

### ***Local District Context***

Before COVID hit in 2020 and the state's focus turned to reading and academic recovery, some district leaders were already examining how children were being taught to read. One was Janet Walden, assistant superintendent of curriculum for Grady County Schools who determined literacy was the district's top challenge when she moved into the role in 2018. When he became superintendent of Fulton County Schools in June 2019, Dr. Mike Looney flagged low reading scores, a concern he prioritized and addressed. Dr. Grant Rivera, superintendent of Marietta City Schools, recognized the possibility of better outcomes through the district's partnership with the Atlanta Speech School to address dyslexia. Each aimed to design an effective solution to improve literacy instruction in their districts.

### ***Grady County Schools***

In Grady County, Walden concluded phonics was the critical component missing in the district's reading instruction and determined other essential elements were not taught consistently across schools. She identified additional gaps including varying practices to identify struggling readers and interventions for them. With support from then-Superintendent Dr. Kermit Gilliard, she determined the district's instructional approach to literacy needed a strong foundation in the early building blocks of phonemic awareness and phonics and consistent instruction in the other three essential reading elements:

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13 Barshay, J. (2020, March 30). Four things you need to know about the new reading wars. The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/four-things-you-need-to-know-about-the-new-reading-wars/>; Hollingsworth, H. (2023, April 20). Why more U.S. schools are embracing a new 'science of reading.' PBS News. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/why-more-u-s-schools-are-embracing-a-new-science-of-reading>

fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.<sup>14</sup> Walden and her colleagues developed a plan to put those elements in place.

Grady County Schools did not have the resources to implement the plan, so Walden applied for a Literacy for Learning, Living, and Leading Grant from the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), known as an L4GA grant. The district was awarded the grant in February 2020. A month later, Covid shut down schools across Georgia. The upheaval caused by Covid delayed implementation of the plan, but it did not shake district leaders' determination to redesign how literacy was taught. It heightened their urgency and gave them new resources to tackle the challenge. Federal pandemic relief funds provided the district with resources that enabled them to go farther and do more than they had initially envisioned under the L4GA grant.

Federal pandemic relief funds were awarded to school districts under three separate legislative acts. Districts in Georgia received \$5.9 billion in total with the largest portion, \$3.8 billion, coming through the third act, the American Rescue Plan Act or ARPA. The funds were distributed based on the districts' poverty rates and could be used flexibly to protect students' health and safety and help them recover from pandemic learning loss. ARPA funds became available in July 2021, but districts had to move quickly to spend them before they expired on September 30, 2024.

### ***Fulton County Schools***

Looney and his team in Fulton County had not settled on a specific approach to improving literacy instruction when Covid hit. Their initial focus was delivering instruction and services safely, but they knew the pandemic was creating new barriers to learning that would cause the greatest harm to their most vulnerable students. They used pandemic relief funds to conduct a comprehensive assessment of literacy practices across the district and found they differed considerably. Many schools relied on versions of balanced literacy, while other schools used different strategies. There was also little consistency in the curricula and other instructional resources schools used.

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<sup>14</sup> Dr. Gilliard is now senior program manager in the Office of Rural Education and Innovation at the GaDOE.

These inconsistencies upended learning for students who switched schools, and district leaders could not effectively support schools if each had a different approach to literacy. District leaders decided to replace this fragmented approach to reading instruction by implementing structured literacy systemwide. When ARPA funds became available in the summer of 2021, Looney recognized it was a rare chance to invest in a full array of resources to implement and support systemwide reform.

### ***Marietta City Schools***

By fall 2020, leaders in Marietta City Schools knew the pandemic had worsened already low literacy levels for many students and sought a solution. The district had partnered with the Rollins Center for Language & Literacy at the Atlanta Speech School on a pilot program to identify and provide effective instruction to students with dyslexia. Rivera and Comer Yates, the executive director of the Atlanta Speech School, expanded this partnership to create a new approach to help children develop strong literacy skills. This approach centers on building a community ecosystem that supports literacy development from birth through third grade. Others have joined the partnership, including nonprofits, early childhood providers, higher education, and philanthropic organizations. The district is a lead partner, and Rivera made reforming literacy instruction a central piece of the initiative.

## **COMPONENTS OF LITERACY REFORM**

Children learn to read in early elementary grades so transforming literacy instruction in elementary schools was the initial focus of districts' reform plans. Shifting to structured literacy in every elementary school was a big change in each district. This shift required deepening educators' knowledge of reading and reading instruction and changing how they teach children how to read. This, in turn, required a framework of integrated supports, which each district created. While there are differences in their frameworks, they share seven common components:<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Details of each district's action steps associated with the components can be found in Appendix A - Fulton County Schools, Appendix B - Marietta City Schools, and Appendix C - Grady County Schools.

1. Leadership-driven focus on literacy
2. High quality training
3. School-based coaches
4. Aligned instructional resources
5. Enhanced district capacity
6. Data-driven instruction
7. Sufficient funding

### **1. Leadership-Driven Focus on Literacy**

Leaders in each district created a vision of effective literacy instruction through a focus on structured literacy. Amid the competing demands and repeated disruptions of the pandemic, they led their teams in designing and implementing systems to ensure this instruction was provided districtwide while making sure teachers and staff had the knowledge, skills, and resources to transform learning.

Making literacy reform a districtwide priority instead of one of many initiatives mattered. Previously, Fulton County had a literacy framework built on the essential elements of reading and resources to help teachers implement them. It also provided high quality training in phonics instruction to about 100 teachers a year, and preliminary results were promising. However, changing literacy instruction was not a consistent focus across district leadership, and the initiative's reach was limited. That changed with Looney and the school board, who shared a commitment to districtwide reform. Reflecting on the shift, a member of the district's ELA team noted, "It's really that focus from the superintendent level... We brought an army and a lot of resources to make big change quickly for literacy."

The willingness of two superintendents to prioritize literacy reform ensured the work in Grady County

"So much of this work has only been able to happen because of (Dr. Rivera's) visibility, to be honest, and his tangible investment in the work. Not just saying he's invested, he attends a lot of the training."

**-DISTRICT INSTRUCTIONAL  
LEADER,  
MARIETTA CITY SCHOOLS**

continued despite a leadership change. Walden began this work with strong support from Gilliard, who stepped down in fall 2021. His successor, Dr. Eric McFee, quickly embraced the reforms underway and enhanced them by developing processes to foster consistent practice across the district and support school leaders.

Leaders' participation in training was an important part of cultivating staff buy-in. Looney, Walden, and Rivera as well as their district leadership teams completed the intensive training in literacy instruction that teachers subsequently undertook. This fostered a shared understanding of effective literacy instruction, an expectation that everyone was part of the reform work, and a common language for literacy across each district.

## ***2. High-Quality Training for Educators***

Each district made high-quality training the foundation of its efforts to ensure that educators teach reading with structured literacy strategies. Instructional coaches, principals, district office staff, and others who support teachers also went through the training. Including these staff members—who have not always been part of previous instructional reform initiatives—enabled them to understand the instructional strategies teachers are expected to use and effectively assist them.

Fulton and Grady County Schools chose an external provider, Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, commonly referred to as LETRS, to provide the training. The program follows the structured literacy approach and includes the essential elements of reading instruction. The training program takes two years to complete.

LETRS combines asynchronous content that participants cover on their own with in-person sessions led by a trained facilitator. Between sessions, school-based coaches helped teachers prepare for upcoming sessions and apply new instructional strategies. Teachers and administrators in the districts compared the training to an intensive graduate-level class, and they described spending many nights and weekends studying.

In Fulton County, central office staff and school board members were the first group to go through the training followed by cohorts of principals and coaches, K-5 teachers, reading



teachers in grades 6-12, and pre-K teachers. Special education and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers who teach reading were also trained. District leaders added professional learning days to the calendar for in-person training sessions. They also provided \$2,500 stipends to staff who completed the training. The stipends are valued incentives. One Fulton principal said, “It definitely helps... it gives teachers the extra push when they need to do an assignment at night.”

In Grady County, the district’s instructional leaders, coaches, K-3 teachers including special education and ESOL teachers, and principals also participated in LETRS training. The district covered training for most educators, and in-person sessions were held on professional learning days. The remaining teachers and instructional staff participated in LETRS training provided by the district’s Regional Education Service Agency as part of an initiative of the Office of Rural Education and Innovation at GaDOE. The training is costly, and support from the rural education office was critical to ensure all of Grady’s K-3 teachers and staff were trained. Grady provided stipends of \$1,000 when teachers completed training.

Marietta City Schools delivered similarly intensive training in structured literacy. It engaged a national expert in dyslexia and the science of reading, the research base for structured literacy, to provide initial training to central office leaders, principals, and coaches so they would have a solid knowledge base to support teachers when their training subsequently began.

The district partnered with the Rollins Center to train K-3 teachers. They created a monthly training cycle led by science of reading (SOR) facilitators, who are literacy experts, at each school. Much like LETRS, the SOR training cycle included an asynchronous pre-session component, in-person training with the SOR facilitator, and follow up support from coaches to review content and apply new practices. The training content was based on a professional development program in structured literacy, Reading Teacher's Top 10 Tools, which includes the five essential elements of reading instruction. The training was conducted over the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years, and teachers who completed it received a one-time salary supplement of \$5,000.

With the initial training for current educators in structured literacy complete, the districts are training new teachers, which will be an ongoing need. Fulton continues to rely on LETRS facilitators to train its new elementary teachers. Educators attend in-person sessions on professional learning days and are supported by their school coaches. The district has maintained the stipend for educators who complete the training. Marietta uses an online literacy training program, Cox Campus, developed by the Rollins Center and available to all districts in the state, to train new teachers. Coaches supported new teachers in the 2023-2024 school year, the first year the district relied on it, but there was not a robust structure in place to ensure teachers stayed on track and were able to apply the training content. For the 2024-2025 school year, the district is using an abbreviated version of the training cycle to support these teachers. New teachers will participate in five training days with SOR facilitators to review training content and practice applying it. The facilitators will also spend a day training these teachers in each school's regular training cycle. Grady County will use Cox Campus for the first time in the 2024-2025 school year.

For many educators in each district, structured literacy was a big and sometimes unsettling switch. Many learned balanced literacy in their teacher preparation programs and used it for years in their classrooms. One teacher described embracing the training content and attempting the new instructional strategies as a leap of faith made possible only by her trust in her superintendent and principal. It was unfamiliar even to many teachers and coaches with advanced degrees in reading. However, teachers came to value the training because it helped them serve students better.

"I remember seeing my 4th graders struggling with reading... And I felt that I was inadequate. I was thinking, 'how do I help them?' ... LETRS helped me improve my teaching drastically."

**-ELEMENTARY TEACHER,  
FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS**

The combination of quality training and comprehensive support from instructional coaches facilitated teachers' mastery of new content and its application in their teaching practice.

## **MARIETTA CITY SCHOOLS: EDUCATOR COACHING CYCLE**

Marietta City Schools developed a comprehensive coaching cycle to train K-3 teachers in structured literacy and help them apply the new instructional practices in their classrooms. Each cycle lasts about a month and combines asynchronous learning and in-person training. The asynchronous portion provides an overview of the cycle's focus and enables teachers to quickly jump into the in-person training sessions.

In-person sessions are held during “coaching weeks” at each elementary school, which are the core of the coaching cycle. The sessions are led by science of reading (SOR) facilitators, who are literacy experts and veteran educators.

A month before each coaching cycle, SOR facilitators meet with coaches and the district K-5 ELA coordinator to preview the upcoming training content. Coaches provide feedback, which enables facilitators to tailor their presentations to the teachers at each school. It also gives coaches time to learn the new content so they can help teachers apply it.

Coaching week launches with a faculty meeting where the facilitator outlines the learning expectations for the week. Teachers participate in two professional learning community (PLC) sessions, a “learning” PLC, where facilitators deliver training content, and an “action” PLC where teachers practice using the new instructional strategies.

The week includes walkthroughs with the facilitator, coach, and school administrators visiting classrooms to observe how teachers are implementing new instructional strategies. Each teacher participates in a walkthrough once a year. They are notified in advance when their walkthrough will be and the specific strategy that will be observed. The walkthroughs are designed to be learning experiences, not “gotcha” moments.

Coaching week concludes with a meeting of school leaders, the facilitator, and the instructional coach to debrief and determine specific steps to help teachers incorporate new strategies.

Though the initial structured literacy training is complete, the district continues to use the coaching cycle to deliver training. Writing was the training focus in the 2023-2024 school year, and, for 2024-2025, the focus will be an in-depth review of structured literacy. Student data and observations revealed inconsistencies in teachers' use of structured literacy practices. A refresher on key components will deepen educators' understanding of these practices and help them effectively apply these practices.

### **3. *School-Based Coaches***

Each district placed coaches in elementary schools to support the adoption of structured literacy. In Fulton, the coaches served grades K-2 and focused exclusively on literacy. Many schools in the district already had an instructional coach so the addition of K-2 literacy coaches enabled existing coaches to focus on literacy in grades 3-5 or to concentrate on providing instructional support in other subjects.

Marietta also provided a coach for each elementary school. As in Fulton, many principals had already invested in instructional coaches, so the addition of a district-funded coach enabled one coach to focus on literacy while the other concentrated on math.

Grady County Schools reconfigured the role of instructional coordinators from administrative to coaching. The coordinators—skilled veteran teachers—were already in every elementary school. Their original role was coordinating testing and assisting school leaders with administrative responsibilities. District leaders recognized that teachers need on-the-ground, real-time support to successfully improve their instructional practices. Without it, they are “free falling.” The coaches in Grady support all grade levels and subject areas.

In every district, coaches take on an array of tasks. With support from district staff and principals, coaches manage the day-to-day implementation of structured literacy in schools starting with educator training. They ensure teachers do not fall behind in their training coursework and assist them when they need help understanding content or completing assignments. In addition to using district-created tools, coaches often develop their own resources. One coach in Fulton County created a LETRS study guide, which

broke the content into smaller chunks to help teachers understand it more easily. Another coach created trivia questionnaires based on LETRS and a newsletter for teachers to remind them of key takeaways from previous training sessions and provide content in manageable pieces. This type of support is particularly helpful to new teachers, who, in addition to the training, are often participating in induction programs as well as navigating the challenges that come with being a novice teacher.

Coaches help teachers apply the knowledge they gain in training. In each district, coaches participate in professional learning communities (PLCs), where teachers collaboratively examine instructional practices and develop shared goals and strategies to improve student learning. Coaches respond to teachers' needs, including clarifying training content, helping plan when and how to use new instructional strategies, reviewing student data, identifying emerging challenges, and monitoring progress.

Coaches work closely with individual teachers struggling to implement new instructional strategies, including assistance with planning, modeling instructional strategies, and observing the teacher and providing feedback. Other teachers need less intensive support, with coaches serving as a just-in-time resource when they have questions, need a troubleshooting partner, or want feedback through an informal observation.

As districts added new curriculum resources, coaches provided essential implementation assistance. They trained teachers on the resources and helped them integrate the resources into their classrooms. This often meant taking district-level implementation guidance and developing specific implementation steps that would foster consistency within and across grade levels in their schools. Coaches were also in classrooms, modeling instruction with the new resources, co-teaching with them, and observing and providing feedback.

“The coaching support has to be there in the building. That’s where they’re going to see the transformation. By having their coach model lessons for them, co-planning sessions, and providing feedback. That’s where the rubber hits to road on getting these practices into place.”

**-INSTRUCTIONAL COACH,  
MARIETTA CITY SCHOOLS**

Coaches sometimes encountered hurdles. There had not been a culture of coaching in Grady, and some teachers perceived coaching feedback as criticism. This is changing as coaches deepen their skills, and district leaders encourage more communication and collaboration across the district.

Coaches, teachers, and administrators noted that instructional coaches do not evaluate teacher performance. Coaches and school leaders sought to create spaces where teachers feel safe asking questions and making mistakes. This is not possible if coaches are evaluating teachers.

The absence of coaches has an adverse impact. Without their support, teachers often flounder. A principal in Fulton shared, “(A) few of our staff members started their training in neighboring districts, but they didn’t have any school-based support. So we are the coaches. We facilitate at times... and also support so we’re showing them what the bridge to practice is... it was more solo and they just sort of fell off.”

#### **4. *Aligned Instructional Resources***

The districts invested in new instructional resources and developed homegrown resources that align with structured literacy and the science of reading.

Fulton adopted new core ELA curricula across all grade levels. For K-5, it turned to Wonders, which was later approved by the State Board of Education as a quality K-3 instructional resource. There were a few hurdles with the implementation of Wonders with teachers reporting challenges with pacing, density of content, and alignment with the state’s ELA standards. In response, the district’s ELA team developed a “spiral,” a guidebook containing daily lesson plans that connect the new curriculum to the state standards as well as LETRS and other instructional resources. The ELA team hosted virtual sessions on each new curriculum unit, guiding teachers through the unit’s content and answering their questions. They used professional development sessions with coaches to more clearly link LETRS content to the new curriculum.



Fulton also added a new curriculum program to support teaching phonemic awareness, Heggerty Phonemic Awareness, and one for phonics, 95 Phonics Core. The district trained coaches in both programs who then trained teachers and provided critical guidance as teachers practiced using them in the classroom. Initially these programs felt scripted to teachers, and some found them awkward to use. With practice, however, teachers became comfortable using both and view them as valuable tools.

Grady County also invested in 95 Phonics Core starting with a pilot in one school. It proved to be a valuable resource, and the district rolled it out to all elementary schools. The district's Multi-Tiered System of Support, or MTSS, coordinator and her team trained teachers with one-on-one sessions in which they modeled its use followed by observation and feedback sessions.

The initial response from teachers in Grady was similar to their peers in Fulton: it felt mechanical, and teachers described walking around their classrooms reading from their laptops. As they became comfortable with the program, however, they began adding their own teaching styles to it so, as one teacher commented, "I can be a teacher, not a reader of a script." Teachers reported their students are developing a better understanding of phonics and readily transfer decoding skills to other classes. They also described how, in combination with their LETRS training, the program helps them quickly identify the specific difficulty a student is having and provide the appropriate instructional response.

Marietta also invested in new curriculum resources to help teachers apply structured literacy strategies in their classrooms. However, it does not require their use. Instead, teachers determine if a particular resource, such as Heggerty, which is one of the resources the district has acquired, would be a valuable tool to use based on student assessment data. The exception to this is the new K-5 ELA curriculum, Wit & Wisdom, which the district has invested in to support reading comprehension. Its use is required. Coaches and teachers also created units with lesson plans that teachers can use.

## **FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS: HELPING SPECIAL EDUCATION & MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS MASTER READING**

Fulton County's work to improve literacy instruction for special education students began several years before the district shifted to structured literacy. In the 2018-2019 school year, the district implemented Lindamood-Bell, a literacy program for students with dyslexia and other disorders that affect their ability to read. The program incorporates explicit and systematic literacy instruction and requires 60 minutes of instruction in specific reading strategies. The program was an uneasy fit for schools. Students were taught through balanced literacy strategies in general education classes and with structured literacy strategies by their special education teachers. Schools also had difficulty accommodating the additional instructional time needed.

The district's subsequent shift to structured literacy brought reading instruction in general education and special education classes into alignment. Both groups of students receive grade level instruction through structured literacy practices, and special education students receive additional instruction through the structured literacy strategies tailored to their specific needs. The district also developed sample schedules schools could use to coordinate instructional times to ensure all students receive the amount of literacy instruction they need.

Special education teachers are assisted by school-based instructional support teachers who help develop student learning plans, manage and ensure compliance with special education requirements, and provide coaching support. Additional support for special education teachers is provided by Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) coaches, who also provide coaching and guidance on instructional issues and serve as thought partners on areas to improve.

The district is also changing instruction for middle school students who are struggling readers. Most understand the basics of reading, but fluency and comprehension are persistent challenges. District leaders reviewed staffing data and determined schools often did not have enough reading teachers to effectively serve these students. In

addition, there was not a consistent reading curriculum across middle schools that aligned with structured literacy.

To turn this around, Fulton County set a new staffing requirement: all middle schools in which 65% or more of students are reading below grade level must have a reading teacher in each grade. This ensures schools will be able to place every student who needs additional support in a reading class. Reading class does not replace English Language Arts class, where the focus is on grade level standards. Instead, these courses supplement grade level instruction by addressing gaps in reading skills. The district also rolled out a new reading curriculum for middle school in the 2023-2024 school year, and feedback from teachers has been positive.

“We’re a high poverty community... (our students) don’t have a lot of background knowledge about the world topics, even our own community, to be able to analyze a text at that level.”

**-MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER,  
FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS**

## **5. Enhanced District Capacity to Support School Staff**

Each district expanded its ability to support teachers, coaches and principals by adding staff who were literacy experts and could provide hands-on assistance in schools.

Fulton County created a new position to guide literacy improvement at the elementary level: a K-5 ELA director position. Previously, the district had an ELA director who oversaw literacy for all grade levels. The additional position enabled each ELA director, K-5 and 6-12, to concentrate on the different concerns of students in each group and delivering the support their teachers need. The directors collaborate with other instructional groups in the district—assessment, special education, ESOL and others—to ensure that all are working in alignment toward their shared goal.

The district added six ELA program specialists, boosting their number in the district from 10 to 16. Their role is supporting instructional coaches. Working with the ELA directors, they plan monthly professional learning sessions for all coaches across the district. The

specialists also lead monthly sessions for coaches within each of Fulton’s seven geographic zones. One coach described these smaller sessions as a supportive space for coaches to share problems, brainstorm solutions, explain best practices from their own schools, and offer encouragement to each other. They also foster relationships across schools, with coaches helping each other outside of the sessions, and reinforce the perspective that changing literacy instruction is a collective endeavor.

Increasing the number of program specialists reduced the number of schools each served, enabling them to spend more time in individual schools. They help coaches develop their skills and work directly with teachers. These visits also help them identify emerging issues that may require additional support or a course correction.

The program specialists developed tools to help teachers connect LETRS training with and implement the new curricular resources. These tools include the ELA spiral, curriculum maps, and exemplars of instructional techniques.

Marietta uses a similar structure. It has a K-5 ELA coordinator, who guides the daily work of moving literacy reform forward across elementary grades at the district level. This includes collaborating with other district-level departments to ensure their work is integrated as well as supporting coaches.

Working with the district’s 6-12 ELA coordinator, the K-5 ELA coordinator leads two monthly sessions for coaches across all grades. One focuses on developing coaches’ coaching skills such as leading PLCs, effective coaching conversations, and strategies to accelerate improvement. During the second session, coaches work together to develop instructional resources for teachers. These resources, such as unit lesson plans, foster consistency in instructional practices across schools. The work sessions are also

“(The program specialists) are working directly with coaches. Sometimes they might be in a PLC meeting, they might be meeting with the (school) leadership team, they might be looking at data with the coach. It depends on what the school is asking them to do or what it needs them to do.”

**-DISTRICT LEADER,  
FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS**

opportunities for coordinators to provide in-the-moment training if coaches do not have full clarity on a concept or instructional strategy.

The K-5 coordinator checks in on classrooms with the coach and principal. These visits give school leaders and the coordinator an opportunity to identify emerging concerns with individual teachers who may need extra guidance or among a group of teachers indicating additional professional development is needed.

As lead trainers, the SOR facilitators are another valued resource for coaches. Their position was created to support the implementation of structured literacy, and there are now four in the district as well as an SOR director. They collaborate with coaches to think through specific action steps to help teachers embed the new knowledge and strategies in their teaching practices.

Grady County assembled a team to design and guide the implementation of literacy reform. Like many rural districts with limited resources, Grady's central office team was skeletal when the district began to reform reading instruction—as assistant superintendent of curriculum, Walden was the entire curriculum department. She tapped Michael Singletary, a principal in the district with a deep knowledge of literacy, to serve as director of curriculum & instruction, assessment & school improvement, a new position.

Walden also added a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) coordinator and an instructional technology specialist, positions that were also new in the district. Guided by McFee, Grady's superintendent, these leaders implemented the initial reform plan and added to it to address emerging needs. This included pulling together teams of experienced teachers to develop curriculum maps, curriculum guides, common assessments, and other resources.

The leadership team established PLCs, a priority for McFee. While teachers met regularly, there was not a structured process for reviewing data, collaborating on student work,

“(W)ith developing the curriculum map, the guides and the assessments, it’s less people figuring it out on their own or with the person next door. Before that, it had been ‘here’s our curriculum and we are on our own.’”

**-ELEMENTARY TEACHER,  
GRADY COUNTY SCHOOLS**

or setting goals. The leadership team designed a districtwide PLC structure, which was organized by grade level and content area. The PLCs were led by leaders across the district— central office instructional leaders, principals, assistant principals, and coaches— with each guiding the PLC for a specific grade and content area. The PLCs followed processes for examining curriculum standards, analyzing data, identifying students who need additional support and determining how to deliver that instruction, and more. They became a forum to examine instruction and foster consistent practices. They also enabled educators to create relationships across school boundaries, encouraging cohesion across the district.

The leadership team meets monthly with instructional coordinators to provide guidance on effective coaching strategies, review student data, and check progress on implementing different reform elements. The coordinators also earned coaching endorsements to support their transition to their new role, and the leadership team earned the endorsement with them. These efforts created a shared understanding of the coaching role, effective coaching practices, and a common language to support the reform work.

A role that was not expanded but is critical to the success of reforming literacy instruction is the principal. In each district, principals make sure that all the components of reform are working in schools they lead. This includes ensuring teachers and coaches have the resources they need and developing a daily schedule that provides each student the instructional time they need. Principals monitor and support the coaching process and the MTSS process to ensure teachers and students are getting the assistance they need. They use data to set goals for their schools, develop action plans to reach them, and manage their implementation. Fulton and Marietta also expanded their ability to support school staff by incorporating evaluation into their work. Fulton engaged external evaluators to monitor the implementation of

" I am making sure every single piece of an action plan is put into our lesson plans... so that we're actually being intentional about instruction... and all of our students are getting met where they need to. "

**-PRINCIPAL**

**FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS**



key elements of reform, including the rollout of new curricula. Marietta also retained an external evaluator who examines a specific aspect of the reform process each year. Leaders in both districts use findings to adjust implementation strategies, which staff recognize and value.

## **6. Data-Driven Instruction to Meet Student Needs**

The three districts employ multiple assessments to understand the skills students have mastered and those they are still learning. Educators use assessment data to determine if a student has a learning gap and, if so, the specific cause of the gap so the teacher can deliver the appropriate intervention. Assessment data also indicates when a student is ready to advance to new skills.

Literacy instruction in the districts is organized to provide time for phonics, whole group instruction in grade level content, and small group instruction where students receive interventions or acceleration based on assessment

data. The composition of small groups is fluid. Assessments are given at the beginning of the year, mid-year, and near the year's end. Educators use assessment results to organize and re-organize small groups to reflect the progress students make and adapt to their instructional needs. Between these assessments, teachers monitor progress by analyzing student work, reviewing performance on unit tests, and using assessments provided by curriculum vendors. Teachers continuously adjust instruction based on these data.

Classroom teachers lead most small groups, which are typically 30 minutes. However, students who are farthest behind are often served by specialists or interventionists. Marietta City Schools hired 37 reading specialists, who have advanced training in structured literacy, to provide interventions to these struggling students. The specialists lead small groups of no more than 10 of these students for 30 minutes up to an hour, depending on the specific needs of the students.

“(W)hen you’re working with that student, you can really explicitly teach what they need to know because you’ve done the assessment.”

**-ELEMENTARY TEACHER,  
FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS**

Grady County established a multi-tiered system of support or MTSS, which is a framework to identify students who need additional support and provide appropriate interventions. Grady previously did not have an effective MTSS system, leaving teachers to determine if a student needed additional support and what that support should be, creating inconsistency.

Grady's MTSS team is led by the MTSS coordinator and includes two full-time intervention teachers at each school as well as several part-time interventionists. The coordinator uses assessment data to identify students in the bottom 20 percent at each school and, with the intervention teachers, develops a plan to provide instruction tailored to each student. The coordinator monitors student progress and reorganizes small groups as students' needs change. Walden described the impact of having an effective MTSS system: "(she) is guiding, supporting, coaching and managing the intervention teachers so that their work stays very finite with working with the students that need the help the most and doing the right work. That is what I believe has made the most difference."

Fulton and Marietta both outlined instructional blocks for ELA. In Fulton, dedicated time for ELA instruction in K-2 is 145 minutes or 160 minutes per day, depending on whether the school schedule includes additional time for interventions outside the standard ELA block. Marietta requires 130 minutes of ELA instructional time in K-2. Both districts allocate specific time for whole and small group instruction. Grady does not require a specific amount of total time for individual components of instruction, but teachers report spending about two hours on ELA instruction daily.

## **GRADY COUNTY SCHOOLS: MAKING NEW MATH STANDARDS WORK**

Already immersed in reforming how reading is taught, Grady County's instructional leadership team built a system to implement the state's new math standards in the 2023-2024 school year. The new standards emphasize experiential math with students frequently learning through hands-on activities. This is a big change from previous methods of math instruction, and teachers needed to support to make the transition.

The leadership team organized grade level teams of experienced classroom teachers, intervention teachers and coaches to plan trainings for teachers in the new standards and develop tools to help teach them. The teams examined each standard and the instructional units GaDOE developed to teach them. They adapted the units to fit the needs of their students and developed curriculum maps, which estimate how much time each unit should take to complete. The grade level teams also developed assessments and training modules for each unit.

Training began in the summer with day-long sessions and continued during the school year in PLCs. In each session, the instructional leadership team provided an overview of each unit, and grade-level teams modeled instructional strategies, which teachers practiced. The leadership and grade-level teams met throughout the year to prepare for each training session and monitor the implementation of the units to understand what was going well and what needed to be revised.

District leaders supplemented these trainings with professional development from national experts in experiential math. These sessions helped teachers apply the new instructional strategies and were a valuable resource according to district leaders.

The district relied on federal relief funds for stipends for the grade-level teams for their work developing the training modules and additional resources. Pandemic relief funds covered substitutes while teachers were participating in training. The district also won a grant from the Georgia Department of Education to implement the new math standards. The hands-on learning activities that are part of the district's new instructional strategy require a lot of manipulatives such as foam blocks, color tiles, coin sets, and graphing mats. The district used grant funds as well as relief funds to cover the cost of the manipulatives, which prevented teachers from having to create instructional resources themselves.

## **7. *Sufficient Funding***

Federal pandemic relief funds and funds from other grant sources were essential to implementing the districts' plans to reform literacy instruction and improve reading proficiency. District leaders would have pursued reform without these resources, but their

plans would not have been as robust and implementing them would have taken longer, which could undermine fidelity in implementation and significantly diminish reach and impact.

Fulton County used pandemic relief funds to cover virtually all components of its reading reform plan, and it pushed its reform timeline to meet the September 30, 2024 deadline for using the funds. The district allocated \$54 million to reading reform, excluding the adoption of new textbooks, including Wonders. Fulton invested \$22.5 million in purchasing new ELA textbooks across all grade levels. The district is taking on some ongoing costs including training for new teachers, training stipends, and coaches, but is reducing the number of ELA program specialists. It is also ending a less visible but valued initiative, Cultural Kaleidoscope, which provided every student an annual cultural field trip. The field trips were designed to build students' background knowledge and vocabulary, which are critical for reading comprehension. Many students do not have the resources to participate in such experiences outside of school.

In Grady County, pandemic relief funds and the L4GA grant from the Georgia Department of Education made reform possible. As those funds wind down, district leaders are stretching dollars from standard federal resources and local funding to keep the district instructional team intact and are aiming to sustain as many interventionist positions as possible. The loss of the external funds could ripple out in unexpected ways in the district. One example is a subscription-based universal screener the district invested in with external funds. Because it had these funds, it was able to purchase the top tier subscription, which provides multiple tools teachers have come to rely on to analyze student data and determine the most effective intervention. Without external funds, the district may have

"We knew that there were so many things that needed to happen, but we just didn't have the workforce or the resources to make them happen. So even being able to purchase MAP, which is expensive, but it's very worth it in what it tells us and what we do to adjust instruction. We couldn't afford it before then."

**-DISTRICT LEADER,  
GRADY COUNTY SCHOOLS**

to drop down to a lower tier that has fewer tools. Covering the cost of substitutes for teachers during PLCs and trainings and stipends for teachers to develop curricular resources are other areas of financial pressure. Losing funding for substitutes would likely end districtwide PLCs and shift to school-based ones, reducing cross-school collaborations and collective discussions about consistent practice.

Marietta relied on philanthropic funds as well as pandemic relief funds for key components of its reform work. These include the initial two-year training in structured literacy, which was covered by a grant from the United Way of Greater Atlanta, and the reading specialists, who were covered by pandemic relief funds. It recently won a grant to cover literacy training for teachers in middle grades as well as for new teachers. The district will absorb the cost of reading specialists though leaders anticipate that, as the number of students reaching proficiency grows, fewer specialists will be required.

## **CONSIDERATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE AND SUSTAINED LITERACY REFORM**

Educators in Fulton County Schools, Grady County Schools, and Marietta City Schools recognize the power of their work. They describe seeing children master reading skills at levels they have not seen previously and with excitement

and growing confidence. Educators also said the work is slow and hard. Progress is often incremental, and sometimes it is not linear. They spoke of the need to anticipate and provide support to their colleagues for the success of their work is collective.

“All of this long-term is reducing high school dropout rates, that’s the longevity of the work we’re doing right now... the children are thriving, and parents are on board.”

**-PRINCIPAL,  
FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS**

The success of these districts’ work to reform literacy instruction is tied to the framework of seven common components they created to support systemic change. As leaders in these districts understood, making structured literacy the standard practice for teaching literacy in every classroom requires creating systems and processes to support that practice. Deep and sustainable change in a core district function—teaching children to

read proficiently—does not happen with a hurried and piecemeal approach.

The systemic reform model these districts designed can provide direction to other districts as they move forward to the goal of effective literacy instruction and improving student reading outcomes. In that context, their work also generates questions state and local education leaders and community stakeholders should consider to bolster the efficacy and sustainability of similar efforts to reform literacy instruction.

**Leadership:** Visionary leadership in each district made the pursuit of transformative change in literacy instruction possible. Each leader had long experience in leadership roles and in-depth knowledge about literacy. Each was also committed to addressing poor reading outcomes before the pandemic. This helped them leverage the possibilities created by federal pandemic relief funds. Many superintendents, principals and other education leaders across the state are new. These new leaders may not have in-depth knowledge about and experience leading systemic change and transforming literacy instruction.

- What training and support do leaders at the school and district levels 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:** These districts had ample external funds to reform literacy instruction through a systemic change framework. The funds enabled the districts to implement the core components of their reform plans with fidelity. Without additional resources, it is unlikely districts across Georgia will be able replicate the strategies these districts used on the same timeline or at the same scale.

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

**Evaluation:** Fulton County Schools and Marietta City Schools used external evaluations to assess their progress implementing reform components. These evaluations helped leaders identify problems and make course corrections. They also helped leaders determine the reform strategies that have the greatest impact on student learning and those that are less effective, information critical in allocating resources. Many districts do not have the capacity to carry out similar external evaluations.

- What technical assistance can be provided to districts to help them evaluate reform implementation and the 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:** A skilled and stable educator workforce is a significant asset to implementing and sustaining literacy reform. District leaders reported challenges recruiting and retaining teachers, which can slow reform's progress. One leader described having 20 new teachers in an elementary school in the 2023-2024 school year. Training them in structured literacy became the focus for the school's instructional coach, limiting the support she could provide to other teachers. Another leader noted ongoing difficulties recruiting teachers and turnover among school leaders.

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

**Student poverty:** Poverty has a significant impact on student outcomes, including in literacy. Low-income students are less likely to be proficient readers in third grade than their non-poor peers.<sup>16</sup> Structured literacy is a way to shrink the literacy gap between poor and non-poor students. A district leader held that structured literacy is the pathway to all students becoming proficient readers, even low-income students, if they remain in the district for their entire K-12 career. Yet, poverty ripples through students' lives in multiple ways that can affect learning outcomes.

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16 Governor's Office of Student Achievement. (n.d.) Direct Certification: Measuring Student Poverty.

Low-income students are more likely to switch schools and districts, which can lead to lower achievement.<sup>17</sup> Schools with high student poverty rates have high teacher turnover rates and are more likely to have new teachers, both linked to lower levels of achievement.<sup>18</sup> Issues outside of school including access to healthcare, housing, and transportation can also create barriers to learning. Within these districts, several teachers in high poverty schools described lack of background knowledge as a barrier to developing fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

- Many of the districts with the greatest literacy challenges also have high poverty rates. 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?

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17 Herbers, J.E., Reynolds, A.J., & Chen, C.C. (2013). School mobility and developmental outcomes in young adulthood. *Development and Psychopathology* 25, 501–515

18 Kraft, M.A., Marinell, W.H., & Yee, D.S. (2016). School organizational contexts, teacher turnover, and student achievement: Evidence from panel data (Working Paper). Research Alliance for New York City Schools. [https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/2021-03/SchoolOrganizationalContexts\\_WorkingPaper\\_0.pdf](https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/2021-03/SchoolOrganizationalContexts_WorkingPaper_0.pdf); Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2013). How teacher turnover harms student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50(1), p. 4-36.



## APPENDIX A: FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS

Leadership-Driven Focus on Literacy	High Quality Training	School-based Coaches	Aligned Instructional Resources	Enhanced District Capacity to Support Change	Data-Drive Instruction	Sufficient Funding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Created a shared vision of effective literacy instruction</li> <li>Developed a systemic approach to reforming literacy instruction</li> <li>Participated in training and was internal advocate for change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>LETRS training for district leaders, school board, principals, coaches, K-5 teachers, 6-12 reading teachers, &amp; pre-k teachers</li> <li>\$2,500 stipend for training completion</li> <li>In-person training on district professional learning days</li> </ul>	<p>District-funded K-2 literacy coach for every elementary school. Coaching activities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitor and support educator completion of literacy training</li> <li>Assist teachers apply training to classroom practice</li> <li>Train teachers on new instructional materials and assist in implementation</li> <li>Ongoing support through modeling new practices, planning lessons, observing and providing feedback</li> </ul>	<p>Includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New K-5 ELA curriculum (Wonders)</li> <li>95 Core for phonics curriculum</li> <li>Heggerty for phonemic awareness curriculum</li> <li>Lindamood-Bell curriculum for special education students</li> <li>District-developed resources including ELA spiral, curriculum maps</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Added K-5 ELA director and ELA program specialists to guide and support school-level staff</li> <li>Hold coaches meeting twice per month for professional development, information sharing, problem solving, and support</li> <li>Develop resources to support reading reform</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple literacy assessments administered 3X per year</li> <li>Whole group instruction for all students in Tier 1</li> <li>Small group instruction based on assessment results</li> <li>Small groups reorganized at regular intervals based on student progress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Federal pandemic relief funds</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX C: GRADY COUNTY SCHOOLS

Leadership-Driven Focus on Literacy	High Quality Training	School-based Coaches	Aligned Instructional Resources	Enhanced District Capacity to Support Change	Data-Drive Instruction	Sufficient Funding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Created a shared vision of effective literacy instruction</li> <li>Developed a systemic approach to reforming literacy instruction</li> <li>Participated in training and was internal advocate for change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>LETRS training for district leaders, principals, coaches, K-3 teachers</li> <li>\$1,000 stipend for training</li> <li>In-person training on district professional learning days</li> </ul>	District-funded coach for every elementary school. Coaching activities include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitor and support educator completion of literacy training</li> <li>Assist teachers apply training to classroom practice</li> <li>Train teachers on new instructional materials and assist in implementation</li> <li>Develop instructional resources</li> <li>Ongoing support through modeling new practices, planning lessons, observing and providing feedback</li> </ul>	Includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>95 Core for phonics curriculum</li> <li>District-developed resources including curriculum guides and curriculum maps</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Created district-level instructional team to guide and support school-level staff</li> <li>Established MTSS system to identify and provide interventions to struggling students</li> <li>Hold monthly coaches for professional development, information sharing, problem solving, and support</li> <li>Design and implement districtwide PLCs</li> <li>Develop resources to support reading reform</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple literacy assessments administered 3X per year</li> <li>Whole group instruction for all students in Tier 1</li> <li>Small group instruction based on assessment results</li> <li>Intervention teachers lead small group instruction for students farthest behind</li> <li>Small groups reorganized at regular intervals based on student progress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Federal pandemic relief funds</li> <li>L4GA grant from Georgia Department of Education</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX B: MARIETTA CITY SCHOOLS

Leadership-Driven Focus on Literacy	High Quality Training	School-based Coaches	Aligned Instructional Resources	Enhanced District Capacity to Support Change	Data-Drive Instruction	Sufficient Funding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Created a shared vision of effective literacy instruction</li> <li>Developed a systemic approach to reforming literacy instruction</li> <li>Participated in training and was internal advocate for change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reading Teachers Top 10 Tools training for district leaders, principals, coaches, K-3 teachers</li> <li>\$5,000 stipend for training completion</li> <li>In-person training on school-based professional learning days</li> </ul>	District-funded coach for every elementary school. Coaching activities include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitor and support educator completion of literacy training</li> <li>Assist teachers apply training to classroom practice</li> <li>Develop instructional resources and assist in implementation</li> <li>Ongoing support through modeling new practices, planning lessons, observing and providing feedback materials and assist in implementation</li> </ul>	Includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District-developed resources including curriculum guides and curriculum maps</li> <li>New K-5 ELA curriculum (Wit &amp; Wisdom)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Added science of reading (SOR) director and SOR facilitators to design and lead literacy trainings</li> <li>Hold coaches meeting twice per month for professional development, information sharing, resource development, and support</li> <li>Develop resources to support reading reform</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple literacy assessments administered 3X per year</li> <li>Whole group instruction for all students in Tier 1</li> <li>Small group instruction based on assessment results</li> <li>Reading specialists lead small group instruction for students farthest behind</li> <li>Small groups reorganized at regular intervals based on student progress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Federal pandemic relief funds</li> <li>Philanthropic grants</li> </ul>



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