

**Blueprint for Early Literacy Comprehensive System of Services,
PreK Through Third Grade
Vermont Agency of Education
July 9, 2019**

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Supporting Each and Every Young Child and Family's Full and Equitable Participation Vermont Guiding Principles

We believe that each and every child...

- Learns within the context of secure and authentic relationships, play, and interactions within their environments.
- Deserves equitable access to experiences that acknowledge and build on their uniqueness.
- Deserves opportunities to deeply learn and develop to their full potential through joyful interactions in safe, accepting environments.

For each and every family, we will...

- Respect and support them as experts, partners, and decision makers in the learning and development of their children.
- Pledge to be open, genuine, reflective, and respectful listeners and communication partners.
- Build caring communities that are accepting of differences and foster a sense of belonging.

For each and every child and their family, we will...

- Promote understanding of the importance of inclusive and effective early childhood experiences.
- Build equitable access to opportunities, supports, and services. Acknowledge and address biases in ourselves and others and the importance of differences such as race, class, gender, family structure, ability, and sexual orientation.
- Advance policies, procedures, programs, and practices that honor and are supportive of each family's culture, strengths, structure, expertise, and preferences.
- Provide options, flexibility, and continuity within each community by working collaboratively within and across agencies, programs, and funding sources.
- Expand the number of early childhood professionals who are well prepared and reflect the diversity of the community.
- Draw upon evidence and research for practices that are responsive and appropriate to the child's culture(s), language(s), abilities, developmental level, identities, and needs.

Note: The complete document is available [online](#).

A Blueprint for Early Literacy Comprehensive System of Services, PreK Through Third Grade

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement.....	1
Supporting Each and Every Young Child and Family’s Full and Equitable Participation	
Vermont Guiding Principles	3
Section 1: Introduction	5
Understanding the Need.....	6
Theory of Change.....	8
Vermont Assets to Support the Plan	10
Section 2: Supporting Children’s Reading PreK through Third Grade.....	13
How Children Learn to Read	14
Balanced Literacy Instruction.....	15
Research and Evidence-Based Practices	16
Section 3: Comprehensive Service Delivery Plan	20
Step 1: Conducting a Local Needs Assessment	20
Step 2: Conducting Local Asset Mapping	22
Step 3: Articulate an Early Literacy Action Plan	23
End Notes.....	34
Appendices	36
Appendix A Definition of Terms.....	36
Appendix B Detailed State Context.....	38
Appendix C Research Resources: How Children Learn to Read	44
Appendix D Research Resources: Identified Best Practices.....	49

Section 1: Introduction

The ability to read is critical to success in learning. All students need to receive systematic reading instruction in the early grades from a teacher who is skilled in teaching reading through a variety of instructional strategies that take into account the different learning styles and language backgrounds of the students. Some students may require intensive supplemental instruction tailored to the unique difficulties encountered.¹

There is broad consensus that learning to read is critical for success in school and beyond.² At the same time, there is recognition that some children struggle to learn to read and meet third grade reading benchmarks. In Vermont, about half of third graders have scored “proficient” or higher on the statewide third grade reading assessment for the past several years, suggesting a broad and persistent challenge. Vermont, like many states, recognizes that supporting children’s learning to read requires a systematic and sustained effort.³

In Vermont, we believe that a collaborative, coordinated, equitable, and aligned PreK-third grade literacy system holds the potential for improving reading outcomes and closing achievement gaps across the state. Following the legislative mandate through Title 16, the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) developed this literacy blueprint, with input from key stakeholders from across the state, to articulate a “comprehensive system of services for early education in PreK, kindergarten, and the first three grades to ensure that all students learn to read by the end of the third grade.”⁴ It is designed to provide the research basis for a set of activities to support the development of literacy among children PreK through third grade. It reflects a deep legislative commitment to support early reading as well as decades of research on the importance of developing early literacy skills for all children to lay the foundation for their success in school and later in life.

Learning to read is a process that starts long before children enter school, as infants, toddlers, and preschool age children are immersed in sounds and language that form the basis of later reading skills. Reading becomes an intentional focus when children enter into formal education programming, typically as prekindergartners. The focus on programs for young children the year or two before they enter kindergarten through third grade recognizes this as a unique period of time in how children develop and learn. It marks a sensitive period when children’s cognitive, language, and social-emotional skills are taking shape. Focusing on PreK through grade three in developing a literacy plan allows for consideration of the range of typical yet variable learning that occurs during the time that children transition from learning early, pre-literacy skills, to becoming fluent young readers by the end of third grade. This period marks the transition from early literacy to later literacy and sets the foundation for success throughout the remainder of schooling.

Audience for the Blueprint

The *Blueprint* is primarily for state and local policy makers and education leaders (e.g., superintendents, principals, curriculum specialists, boards of education members, etc.) as they have pivotal roles in overseeing the development and implementation of a comprehensive plan in early literacy.

Structure of the Blueprint

The *Blueprint* is divided into four sections:

- **Section 1** provides information about young Vermonters' early reading achievement and identifies key resources in Vermont to support early reading.
- **Section 2** provides the research and evidence-based practices that support a collaborative, coordinated, equitable, and aligned PreK-3 literacy system.
- **Section 3** outlines a comprehensive literacy plan for children PreK-3 including potential roles and responsibilities at the state and local level.
- Finally, a series of appendices is included to provide further information in several areas including: definition of terms (Appendix A); details about Vermont state policies and programs that support the plan (Appendix B); a further review of the research on how children learn to read (Appendix C); and, a listing of additional research resources for the identified best practices (Appendix D).

Understanding the Need

The clearest indication of the need for an intentional early literacy plan is the annual assessment of student learning in literacy (indicated by test scores in English Language Arts - ELA) as these data provide direct indicators of each student's reading performance. Teaching Strategies GOLD™, assesses the objectives of Language and Literacy and is utilized in all Universal PreK programs. The statewide kindergarten entry assessment, Ready for Kindergarten! Survey (R4K!S), may be informative as well, although these data are based upon teacher ratings of the child's functioning across all essential domains for school readiness, including a general indicator of cognitive development that includes several items indicative of early literacy.

Student Performance on English Language Arts Assessments

Data from the annual Smarter Balanced Assessment in 2017-18 highlight several areas of concern regarding young Vermonters' reading.⁵

- 50% of third graders statewide were not proficient in English and Language Arts (ELA). The percentage of students scoring proficient or above in late grades is only marginally higher (ranging between 53-57% from fourth through ninth grade).

- The percentage of third graders scoring at or above proficiency levels in 2018 is similar to the results from 2017 (49%), but it is lower than 2016 (54%) and 2015 (52%). In other words, there is some evidence toward a downward trend.
- The data also show broad disparities in third grade reading across important subgroups:
 - Student gender – 55% of girls scored proficient compared to 46% of boys.
 - Race/ethnicity – 36% of black and 46% of Hispanic students scored proficient, compared to 57% of Asian and 51% of white students. Students who reported as American Indian or Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander were based upon smaller numbers of test-takers (but more than half of each group (52% and 59%) tested as proficient).
 - Family eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch – a lower percentage of children who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch scored proficient (35%) compared with students not eligible (62%).
 - English Learners – 31% of children identified as English language learners scored proficient or above (31%) compared to their peers, who scored (51%).
 - Students receiving special education services – 13% of children with IEPs were proficient compared with 57% of students without IEPs.
 - Historically marginalized groups – 35% of historically marginalized students scored proficient or above, compared to non-marginalized students (67%).
- Data from the 2016-2017 academic year revealed broad differences across supervisory unions/supervisory districts in the state in the percentages of students proficient on the assessment.⁶

Collectively, data from the 2018 ELA assessments show concern for the overall level of proficiency across the state, but also the broad differences between students from different backgrounds. The data on students from historically marginalized groups captures the discrepancy strongly; students from marginalized groups were half as likely to score proficient in third grade ELA. This underscores the challenges of providing equitable education (in literacy and likely beyond).

Data from the Ready for Kindergarten Readiness Survey (R4K!S)

Data from R4K!S do not provide a fine enough resolution to consider literacy, specifically, but they can be used to anticipate the broader needs of students. Overall 85% of children were rated in the “ready” category by their teachers the 2017-2018 school year.⁷ However the data also showed disparities between groups of children similar to those noted above for ELA proficiency: a higher percentage of girl (88%) than boys (80%) were rated as ready, and 91% of children not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch were rated as ready compared to 74% of students who were eligible. These data reiterate and amplify important differences between children when they begin school that seem to sustain into their early elementary achievement.

Generally, data on reading in Vermont suggests some degree of stagnation. Over the past few years, proficiency scores have been flat to slightly falling, and commonly reported disparities in achievement have been present and persistent. To change the status quo requires an examination of the current resources, policies, and programs that Vermont has put into place or is developing, and identify additional, new and innovative ways to provide a comprehensive and systemic approach to improving literacy for each and every student.

Theory of Change

A successful literacy plan reflects the state context for which it is being built, including the vision provided by the state education agency. It is designed specifically to meet identified needs that can be presented as a singular Theory of Change. The theory of change articulates a specified process through which the comprehensive plan for services will utilize existing and developed resources to strengthen the capacity of education stakeholders across the state to improve early literacy instruction and support, and ultimately improve, student literacy. If research and evidence-based practices are embedded into it, then effective implementation of the Comprehensive Early Literacy Plan will result in improved early language and literacy outcomes for children PreK through third grade (see *Figure 1*, below).

Figure 1: Vermont Early Literacy Blueprint Theory of Change

*If Vermont implements its Early Literacy Comprehensive System of Services Plan, then...
 Vermont will strengthen capacity to improve early literacy instruction and support;
 If literacy instruction and support is improved, then literacy development and achievement PreK through grade three will increase.*

NEED

1. To improve student literacy skills and achievement PreK through grade three for each and every student in Vermont.
2. To build capacity statewide to effectively support literacy development PreK through grade three by: designing and implementing appropriate early literacy learning experiences; and promoting literacy learning PreK through third grade.



ASSETS/INPUTS

- Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS) and Common Core Standards
- Vermont Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment System Framework (VECCAS) and Local Comprehensive Assessment System (LCAS)
- Education Quality Standards
- Vermont Multi-tiered System of Supports Framework (VTmtss) and Early MTSS Framework
- Expanding and Strengthening Best-Practice Supports for Students Who Struggle
- Trends in student performance data
- Federal funds that support stakeholders
- External stakeholders



ACTIONS/OUTPUTS

- Research/evidence-based practice that focus on:
- teacher capacity
 - curriculum & instruction
 - multi-tiered system of supports
 - assessment system
 - equitable and developmentally, linguistically, & culturally appropriate instruction
 - learning environment and social emotional learning
 - family engagement & community partnerships
 - leadership & systems



RESULTS

- Teachers have skills and expertise to successfully teach students who struggle.
- Increased early literacy experiences and student literacy achievement PreK through grade three.
- All children enter school ready to learn/kindergarten ready.
- All students reading on grade level by the end of third grade.

Vermont Assets to Support the Plan

Vermont has several existing policy reports, systems, programs, and resources that readily support and set the context for the development of an early childhood comprehensive literacy plan. By integrating existing policies and systems, the comprehensive plan both reinforces the system of education for young children while also identifying potential synergies in implementing the statewide action plan and the development of local plans. These are discussed briefly below (for more detail, see Appendix B).

1. *Supporting Each and Every Young Child and Family's Full and Equitable Participation: Guiding Principles (2017)*

This brief report articulates the Vermont AOE guiding principles in recognizing and respecting the diversity of the young children and their families across the state and their right to equitable participation in education.⁸ This document outlines Vermont's commitment "... to fully include each and every child and their family in a continuum of meaningful experiences to ensure their health, mental health, safety, happiness, and success now and into the future."

2. *The Vermont Education Quality Standards*

Officially known as State Board Rule 2000, School Quality Standards, the current Education Quality Standards (EQS) were adopted in 2014 to ensure that "all students in Vermont public schools are afforded educational opportunities that are substantially equal in quality and enable them to achieve or exceed the standards approved by the State Board of Education. The EQS effectively captures two fundamental ideals – equity of opportunity for all students and a focus on the learning standards applicable to all Vermont children.

3. *The Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS)*

The Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS) are a resource for families, teachers, caregivers, administrators, and policy makers to provide a common language to describe developmentally, age appropriate expectations for children across their early years, from birth through third grade, in all essential areas of development and learning. They underline critical decisions about early childhood education programs, including the development and selection of program-wide curriculum and educational strategies.

4. *Universal Prekindergarten (Act 166)*

Act 166 of 2014 provides for universal access to publicly funded prekindergarten education. Under the law, children who are three-, four- or five-years-old but not enrolled in kindergarten are entitled to receive 10 hours of PreK education per week for 35 weeks over a school's calendar year. Curriculum, including early language and literacy must align with the Vermont Early Learning Standards. Universal public and private PreK programs are offered in state approved Head Start, public school, private childcare centers, and family home childcare programs in Vermont.

5. *Early Childhood Special Education and Special Education*

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) services support children ages three up to six years. ECSE is administered through local school districts to ensure full access and participation in early childhood programs for each and every child who is determined eligible for services. ECSE and Special Education (ages six through twenty-one) services enable young children with disabilities to be full participants in everyday routines and activities across a variety of settings- in their homes with their families, in childcare, PreK, school programs, and in the community- throughout the early childhood years.

6. *Vermont Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment System Framework*

The state developed the Vermont Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment System (VECCAS) specifically to map early childhood assessments commonly used across the state, their alignment with the Vermont Early Learning Standards, and the systematic means by which assessments can be organized to ensure they provide critical data for early education stakeholders (teachers, program directors, and policy makers) to make informed decisions. The Framework calls for programs to use "...evidence-based, developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate assessment methods."

7. *Vermont Multi-tiered System of Supports (VTmtss)*

The VTmtss Framework is a systemic approach to decision making for excellence and equity within a culture of continuous improvement that focuses on successful outcomes for all students. This systemic approach:

- Supports the collaboration of all adults to meet the academic, behavioral, social and emotional needs of all students

- Provides a layered continuum of high-quality, evidence-based instruction, intervention, and assessment practices that are matched to student strengths and needs
- Relies on effective and timely use of meaningful data
- Helps districts and their schools organize resources to accelerate the learning of every student, and
- Engages and develops the collective expertise of educators, students, family and community partnerships



8. *Early MTSS*

Vermont developed the Early MTSS Systems Inventory as a tool for evaluating the effectiveness of the five key components (listed below) of an MTSS system. Local Education Agencies (LEAs) use the Systems Inventory to assess whether each of the components of the Early MTSS initiative is implemented with fidelity, is sustainable, and benefits children and families.

Early MTSS offers professional development to administrators and early childhood educators on the five components of a multi-tiered system of supports framework:

- Strong system support. A system is strongly supported by a functioning leadership team, staff commitment, and supportive systems.
- Partnership and collaboration. Comprehensive partnership and collaboration include families, community-based partners, and transition support (including transition support for kindergarten through third grade).
- Well-designed professional development. Professional development is designed well when staff needs are identified, support is provided, and learning and implementation are assessed.

- Provision of high-quality and responsive learning environments. In high-quality and responsive learning environments, children are confident and competent in their social and emotional skills, literacy, and mathematics.
- Comprehensive and functional assessment system. An assessment system is comprehensive and functional when it includes an effective problem-solving process, decision making based on data, and the promotion of ongoing improvement.

9. *Expanding and Strengthening Best-Practice Supports for Students Who Struggle* report

This report by the District Management Group (DMG) summarizes findings from a study to determine best practices to improve the effectiveness, availability, and equity of services for students who struggle, both with and without IEPs during the 2016-17 school year. They identified five opportunities for improving services and supports for students:

1. Ensure elementary core instruction meets most needs of most students;
2. Provide additional instructional time outside core subjects aligned to the core instruction, to students who struggle, rather than providing interventions instead of core instruction;
3. Ensure students who struggle receive all instruction from highly skilled teachers;
4. Create or strengthen a systems-wide approach to supporting positive student behaviors based on expert support; and
5. Provide students having more intensive support needs with specialized instruction from skilled and trained experts.

These opportunities are central to VT AOE's efforts at ensuring educational equity for all students and underlies the design for how the state will allocate resources to schools under Act 173 of 2018 provisions.

Section 2: Supporting Children's Reading PreK through Third Grade

As noted in the Theory of Change, improving children's early literacy is built upon research and evidence-based practices. This section of the *Blueprint* summarizes the best current research on how children learn to read and implications for instruction; also identifies research and evidence-based practices to support early literacy focused on eight key areas of practice. Appendix C details the research summarized below.

How Children Learn to Read

Learning to read is a complex and multi-faceted process that begins long before children enter a formal school setting.⁹ The early language acquisition stakes are high. Previous work has shown that children's literacy skills when they start school correlate to later reading success. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, one in three children starts kindergarten without the necessary foundational literacy. Reading rates by third grade are the best predictor of high school graduation, but alarmingly, two-thirds of children in the United States fail to develop reading proficiency by third grade. 80% of these children fall below the poverty line.¹⁰

Parents are their children's first teachers. Current research shows that reading books with a child beginning in early infancy can boost vocabulary and reading skills four years later, before the start of elementary school. Quality book-reading during early infancy predicts early reading skills while book-reading quantity and quality during toddler years appears strongly tied to later emergent literacy skills, such as name-writing at age 4.¹¹ Results highlight the importance of parenting programs and collaboration with community resources such as public libraries and pediatric offices.

An extensive body of research exists both on the skills children need to become good readers and ways to promote and guide children as they progress through emergent literacy, early reading, and towards fluency (see Appendix C). Critically, reading must be taught by skilled teachers.¹²

To become readers, children must develop two broad sets of skills: "code-based" skills and "meaning-based" skills. Code-based skills include the ability to map letters to their respective sounds and in combination to read words. Meaning-based skills include understanding the meaning of text, or comprehension and include oral language use and vocabulary. To be a competent reader, code-based skills are necessary but not independently sufficient. Students also need meaning-based skills to support reading comprehension and writing. However, these two broad skill sets differ in their developmental course and in the amount and types of instruction that support them. Generally, code-based skills can be acquired by third grade (and roughly mark the end of "emergent literacy" and the beginning of the "early literacy" period). These are generally acquired faster through direct and explicit instruction. Meaning-based skills, on the other hand are cumulative and continuously develop from early childhood on. Developing these skills require more exposure to hearing and using language, opportunities to build vocabulary both through specific instruction and broad experience and applying comprehension of texts.

In addition, both exposure and access to high quality children's literature is essential in building literacy skills. Quality literature does not tell the reader everything they need to know; it allows

for some difference in opinion; strengthening the cognitive developmental domain and encouraging deeper thought. Quality children’s literature also provides an avenue for students to learn about their own cultural heritage and the cultures of other people. Stories have the power to promote emotional and moral development as well as creativity and imagination.¹³

Balanced Literacy Instruction

As described above, young students’ reading skills continue to develop throughout the period of PreK through third grade. As a result, effective instruction looks different across this span as children’s skills develop and their learning needs change.¹⁴ Below is a very brief overview of key aspects of effective instruction. The key takeaway is that supporting student early literacy requires *evidence-based instructional practices* employed by *highly skilled teachers*.¹⁵

Research clearly supports the use of a range of instructional approaches in supporting literacy development for students during the PreK through third grade period.¹⁶ At one time it was believed that learning to read occurred naturally without need for much specific instruction. However, research on how young children learn to read concludes that varied instructional approaches are necessary. To build code-based skills, explicit instruction, especially in phonics, is very effective. To build meaning-based skills, some explicit instruction is effective, but so is exposure to language and reading through other approaches.¹⁷ Effective teachers draw from a range of instructional approaches and intentionally use those most suitable for the children and their instructional goal. Young children learn through hands-on, meaningful experiences, and meaning-making skills occur within rich learning experiences. Teachers may use read-alouds with varying degrees of interactivity, rhyming or singing games to play with sounds, explicit instruction in speech sounds, conversation for sound awareness and vocabulary growth, and writing, drawing, dramatic arts among other approaches.

Increasingly experts recognize that throughout early literacy learning, instruction must focus on both code-based and meaning-related skills.¹⁸ When children are beginning to acquire literacy skills, more attention tends to be paid to code-based skills, like understanding letter sounds (phonemic skills), while also supporting meaning-related skills by providing rich oral language experiences to build vocabulary. As children acquire the code-based skills and start to develop fluency, relatively less attention is paid to these skills and more explicit attention is paid to meaning-related skills, including vocabulary and comprehension. For example, teachers of preschool-aged children will tend to spend more time providing targeted instruction on specific skills, targeting the same skills through multiple approaches that are repeated and sustained over time while the child learns the skill.

With older children, the time spent targeted at specific skills decreases as students gain mastery of them, so comparatively more time can be spent in supporting meaning making through

vocabulary and oral language, writing, and other meaning-based skills. However, while “this is a shift in many early learning and elementary classrooms, where the focus of literacy instruction is most often on code-based skill development...students should always be learning to read and reading to learn, and they must always be learning content if they are to develop adequate content and language knowledge to read proficiently.”¹⁹

Children with language disorders, compromised hearing, or other developmental delays may use tools other than the spoken word to learn to communicate. Pictures, symbols, gestures, American Sign Language, assistive technology and other augmentative and alternative communication systems may be needed on the way to developing, or instead of using, typical speech. The same goals should exist for children whose language and communication develop differently, although their pace and pathways may vary from children who are developing “typically.”²⁰

Literacy for English language learners (ELLs) should include intensive language development as well as instruction in literacy strategies and skills. Providing a solid foundation for literacy is critical for young children who are already bilingual or are learning a second language.

Research and Evidence-Based Practices

The need to build a comprehensive plan based upon practices shown to be effective in supporting early literacy is clear.²¹ The practices included here were compiled from published reports, guidance and recommendations vetted by the U.S. Department of Education and other national policy and research organizations.²² The practices are organized here according to six key focus areas, and example references provided as endnotes. A list of references and resources for each of these areas is included as Appendix D. Further detail and application of these are included in the Comprehensive Service Delivery Plan located in **Part 3**.

The following focus areas operate within the VTmtss Framework:

1. A Systemic and Comprehensive Approach: A Systemic Culture of Growth and Improvement
2. Effective Collaboration: A Culture of Collaboration
3. High-quality Instruction and Intervention that is Responsive and Differentiated: A Culture of Instructional Excellence and Engagement
4. Comprehensive and Balanced Assessment System: A Culture of Data-Informed Decision Making
5. Expertise: A Culture that Builds Expertise
6. Decision Making for Excellence and Equity: A Culture of Equitable and Developmentally, Linguistically, and Culturally Appropriate Practices

Focus Area 1: Systemic and Comprehensive Approach: A Culture of Continuous Growth and Improvement

Research and Evidence-Based Practices:

- Engage in ongoing quality and continuous improvement (PreK through grade three) with focus on strategies to address gaps in learning, equity and access, transitions PreK to K, and goals for grade-level reading.
- Leverage school resources to ensure efficient, effective practices surrounding language and literacy instruction and intervention.
- Align school policies and practices to support literacy initiatives.
- Align classroom practices and professional learning opportunities with language and literacy instruction priorities, all with strong research-based support.
- Use data accurately to identify successes and challenges, make meaningful adjustments, and impact language and literacy proficiency.
- Leaders have a strong understanding of child development and how children learn.
- Literacy curriculum is aligned with Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS) which embed the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).
- Design of the literacy curriculum and plan for early literacy instruction and interventions reflect instructional practices that have been empirically shown to support gains in student achievement.

Focus Area 2: Effective Collaboration: A Culture of Collaboration with Families and Community

Research and Evidence-Based Practices:

- Identify and share strategies to support and guide parents of young children with their children's learning.
- Provide out of school time activities that include early language and literacy experiences.
- Create and sustain community connections with organizations that can support early literacy.
- Create and sustain partnerships with PreK service providers to support language/literacy development and kindergarten readiness.
- Create and sustain parent/family partnerships that support language/literacy proficiency.
- Build processes to support a seamless transition from PreK to K.

***Focus Area 3: High-Quality Instruction and Intervention that is Responsive and Differentiated:
A Culture of Instructional Excellence and Engagement***

Research and Evidence-Based Practices:

- Establish a healthy and safe learning environment that is conducive to student engagement, student productivity, and intensive language/literacy instruction.
- Create or strengthen a systems-wide approach to supporting positive student behaviors based on best practices.
- Selection of instructional materials is based on rigorous research and standards.
- Focus on explicit and systematic instruction in foundational reading skills based on student need (e.g., phonemic awareness and phonics, fluency, academic vocabulary, comprehension, and writing).
- Provide intense increased instructional support with a certified teacher of reading to students not reading on grade level as long as it takes to acquire third grade-level reading, writing, speaking, and listening proficiency skills.

Focus Area 4: Comprehensive and Balanced Assessment System: A System of Data Informed Decision Making

Research and Evidence-Based Practices:

- Ensure that assessments are developmentally appropriate for young children (i.e., purposeful in design, use, and interpretation; clearly and explicitly integrated into the overall system, including curriculum and instruction, and represent the valued outcomes on which instruction is focused; and are beneficial in that they serve to optimize learning time and resources).
- Use valid and reliable standardized literacy assessments (including screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring instruments) to determine the need for early literacy intervention.
- Ensure that progress monitoring assessments are aligned with instructional content and used to track students' response to intervention and inform intervention placement.
- Ensure there is a balanced range of assessment types to address the specific purpose at hand
- Ensure parents and students receive clear and comprehensible information about students' proficiency, behavior or social-emotional well-being
- Ensure decision makers have evidence and information about each component of the VTmtss Framework

Focus Area 5: Expertise: A Culture that Builds Expertise

Research and Evidence-Based Practices:

The school cultivates both individual and systems expertise by examining roles and responsibilities, thoughtfully planning ways to address gaps through thoughtful hiring and evaluation practices, securing embedded school level support, and providing high-quality professional learning.

- Instructional staff meet highest standards, certification, validation requirements for language and literacy instruction PreK through third grade.
- Develop, implement, and improve rigorous, transparent, and fair evaluation and support systems for early childhood educators PreK through third grade.
- Teachers have access to high quality professional learning to build a community of early literacy experts.
- Teachers have opportunities for collaborative professional learning (e.g., communities of practice, instructional rounds, walk-throughs).
- Teachers have access to embedded professional learning supports (e.g., coaching).

Focus Area 6: Decision Making for Excellence and Equity: A Culture of Continuous Improvement

Research and Evidence-Based Practices:

Provide for equity and access to high quality early language/literacy for all children PreK through third grade.

All children regardless of their specific learning needs are guaranteed access to the general education curriculum and specially designed accommodations and modifications.

English learners have access to a research-based system of services within an early childhood program designed to ensure high-quality, effective language and literacy instruction for ELLs and children who speak only English.

Children in low-income conditions receive special assistance and services to address factors that contribute to third-grade reading proficiency, including school readiness programs, efforts to reduce chronic absence, summer learning opportunities, and high-quality teaching.

Establish a healthy and safe learning environment that is conducive to student engagement, student productivity, and intensive language/literacy instruction.

Create or strengthen a systems-wide approach to supporting positive student behaviors based on best practices.

Provide for equity and access to high quality early language/literacy for all children PreK through third grade.

Selection of high-quality, high interest literature and informational text at various levels to meet the needs of all readers.

Section 3: Comprehensive Service Delivery Plan

The AOE developed this *Blueprint* to support the development and implementation of a comprehensive literacy service delivery plan for children in PreK through third grade. As noted in the theory of change, the plan must integrate an understanding of the specific needs identified among students and the assets and resources available (or able to be made available). This section lays out a 3-step process by which state and local leaders and policy makers can develop plans that effectively target state and local needs through identifying available resources to support evidence-based literacy practices that if implemented will lead to increased literacy. The plan serves as a launching point for local communities to devise specific activities and timelines that meet their unique needs and assets. The literacy plan should tie closely to Continuous Improvement Plans (CIPs), not replace them.

Step 1: Conducting a Local Needs Assessment

Data on statewide student literacy were presented in Section 1. These data clearly show overall room for improved literacy, but also highlight areas of disparity, between historically marginalized groups of children, as well as between supervisory unions. As a result, it is critical to look more closely at the nature of literacy needs locally. These data should be part of a broader needs assessment process undertaken as part of local planning or can be readily added to that process.

The first step in conducting a local needs assessment is to identify the data that will provide the most useful information in understanding the local literacy needs. In addressing student literacy needs, two sets of data are most powerful – data on student literacy learning and achievement, and data on teachers’ literacy practices.

Student Data

Data on student scores on the Smarter Balanced ELA assessment are reported for all children in grades 3 through 9 by the state in aggregate as well as broken out by subgroups and supervisory unions. These data are limited however in their power to inform local needs.

Smarter Balanced ELA data are only available starting in third grade – they do not describe student literacy outcomes in PreK-2nd grade. Therefore, any data on student literacy learning that can be gathered locally are critical. The most useful student data are those that describe literacy learning across all aspects of literacy (including the set of code-based and meaning-based skills discussed in Section 2). These data may or may not be available through local assessment practices. This leads to several critical questions: *Are any local assessment tools in use (or able to be adopted) that can provide detailed data on PreK through third grade students' literacy learning? Is there a system in place to collect these data, analyze them, and provide them in ways that can effectively guide programmatic and instructional planning?*

Other student data that inform local needs may include: information about student attendance patterns; non-literacy student data including information about social and emotional development and well-being; linguistic and cultural background of students and their families; and, levels of family literacy. Local communities may identify additional data points specific to them as well.

Teacher Data

While teachers are an important asset, understanding teacher's current literacy-related practices is also an important component of the local needs assessment. Research clearly shows a link between teachers' knowledge and use of effective early literacy practices and student literacy.³ At the same time there is concern that many teachers of young children do not have this knowledge and/or the skills to use these practices. As a result, examining the literacy knowledge and pedagogy of teachers in PreK through third grade classrooms provide important information about a potential area of need.

System Data

In the context of your student and teacher data, system data should also be considered. For example, considerations should be made to: ensure Universal Instruction meets most needs of most students; provide additional instructional time outside of core subjects to students who struggle, rather than providing interventions instead of core instruction; ensure learners who struggle receive all instruction from highly skilled teachers; create or strengthen a systems-wide approach to supporting positive student behaviors based on best practice expert support; provide students with more intensive support needs specialized instruction from skilled and trained experts. For more information on how to connect a comprehensive needs assessment, please refer to the current materials in the [Comprehensive Needs Assessment Toolkit](#) and in the [VTmtss Field Guide](#).

Analyzing Data to Prioritize Needs

Once data have been identified (or plans made to collect these data), they need to be analyzed and the results used to prioritize needs. The best needs assessments tend to be the most specific, requiring detailed data and analysis. Like the data reported statewide, analysis consider important subgroups of students, but also must consider data at the classroom (and/or teacher) and school level. If possible, data on student learning needs to identify specific areas of literacy learning to allow for more targeted activities. Data analysis occurs in concert with asset mapping to establish short- and long-term goals driven by the level of needs identified and the readiness to apply necessary assets. It typically includes multiple stakeholders from the schools and local community working together over time to develop a detailed timeline of action.

Step 2: Conducting Local Asset Mapping

As noted in Section 1 (and Appendix A), there are many systems and initiatives currently in place across Vermont that can support early literacy. Communities also offer their own, often unique, sets of assets in addressing their specific needs. The process of asset mapping, however, goes beyond indicating the presence of a given program or initiative and considers the degree to which it is implemented as well as ways in which multiple assets may be integrated.

Asset mapping entails detailing the extent to which assets critical to the implementation of evidence-based practice are available (or may be available) locally or across the state. In education practice, it is essential to consider the access to assets both locally and statewide. Such a layered approach is necessary because: (1) some assets are not tied to a specific locality (e.g., teacher preparation programs are often not highly geographically defined); and (2) some assets are more directly controlled by state-level policies and decisions than others (e.g., requirements for licensing educators are typically state-determined). Finally, asset mapping at both levels is critical in illuminating inequities across groups within the state and district, as well as potential inequities across districts.

Local asset mapping can begin by asking questions about what resources are available (or may be made available), and how ready they are to be utilized. In addition, assets that may be unavailable or underdeveloped can be identified and may define a part of the local needs to be addressed.

Some questions to guide local asset mapping:

1. What percentage of eligible children are enrolled in PreK programs? What do you know about the quality of the literacy experiences these settings provide? Is expanding PreK, through other means a possibility?

2. What percentage of children are identified/referred for Early Childhood Special Education services (ECSE) and what percentage receive these services? Where are these services provided?
3. Are reading specialists available? Is there space and funding to expand this number?
4. What percentage of your early educators have specialized training in literacy? Do they have access to literacy coaches and other supports?
5. Are school leaders knowledgeable about early literacy and pedagogy? Are they able to ensure best practices toward how literacy occurs in their school?
6. What data are available to help identify areas of need? Who has access to these data and are they in a position to make decisions based upon the data?
7. What organizations are active in your community that have or may develop literacy-supportive activities (e.g., public libraries, businesses, other organizations)?

Step 3: Articulate an Early Literacy Action Plan

An effective comprehensive early literacy plan is specifically designed to meet identified state and local needs. It builds off the available assets and resources as well as those that the state and/or local agencies anticipate being able to provide to support activities expected to address the identified needs. A statewide plan recognizes the roles of a state education agency as well as the supervisory unions and supervisory districts in providing comprehensive literacy services for young children:

- State Agency – establishes state policies and funding priorities and practices; sets and maintains standards (learning standards, quality standards, etc.); etc.
- State Standards Board - approves education quality standards
- Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators (VSBPE) – approval of educator standards
- Supervisory Union and Supervisory District – leads schools locally, including identification and support of curriculum, oversight of teachers in classrooms; etc.

The plan that follows is structured to follow the five components of the VTmtss Framework as well as the VTmtss in Action. This section “emphasizes how these reinforcing and interaction components are used to establish and propel decision making within a culture of continuous improvement.” Under each topic, recommended practices are listed, followed by specific actions that may be taken by the state and/or local level to implement. Each area of practice includes the following: (1) recommendations at the state agency and opportunities managed at the state level are identified; (2) recommendations at the local agencies (supervisory unions and supervisory districts) and schools are identified.

The specific elements of the plan are suggestions to spur discussion at the state and local levels about what opportunities are available or may be made available given resources to implement a comprehensive approach to supporting PreK through third grade literacy. A focal point of these discussions should be the readiness to implement an activity that may be more appropriate based on the available resources. In addition, a timeline for implementation, including key benchmarks, will need to be developed as well as a process for collecting indicator data to inform implementation.

1. Systemic and Comprehensive Approach: A Systemic Culture of Continuous Growth and Improvement

- Ensures **equity** by providing an appropriate context for learning with layered supports and **personalized** instruction for **all students**
- Commits to effective and committed leadership at all levels of the system is crucial for guiding and sustaining educational excellence and equity.
- Supports all students by providing each student with the highest quality classroom instruction that is informed by research, supported by a standards-based curriculum, and provided by highly-qualified educators.
- Data use informs instruction and determines resources.
- **Interrelated principles** are most effective when **integrated within a coherent plan for continuous improvement** that recognizes how recursive assessment, reflection, and adaptation improve instruction and increase student achievement.

State Recommendation

- Regularly reaffirm commitment to use of the VTmtss Framework and Early MTSS statewide.
- Support efforts to revise the VTmtss Framework and Early MTSS materials and trainings to maintain alignment with latest research.
- Continuously examine how resources are allocated toward priorities (e.g., identify where governance structures limit or allow for flexibility in resources allocation, and the strategic use of federal and local funds).
- Ensure that funding streams allow the state to serve all students, including working with local education agency (LEA)) to understand how to leverage and access funds effectively.
- Develop strategies to address turnover, recruiting, and retention.
- Balance leadership with management, within the state education agency (SEA) and in working with LEAs, including the use of effective teaming structures and distributed leadership.

- Send more SEA staff into the field to provide technical assistance and support.
- Maintain laws protecting school zones from drugs and weapons that undermine student safety.
- Identify potential measures for a positive learning environment.
- Identify local programs that are effective in providing optimal learning environments.

Local Recommendation

- Develop a system that assesses student needs and identifies struggling readers and provides appropriate and timely supports with consistent monitoring.
- Develop a process for identifying and addressing any potential bias.
- Ensure that struggling students receive additional instruction in addition to instructional time in core subjects (not as a replacement).
- Provide all instructional staff with access to training and support in implementing the VTmtss Framework.
- The leadership team uses all Early MTSS data to inform decision making, support continued quality improvement and keep program staff focused on desired outcomes.
- Ensure that school leaders understand current effective literacy practices, as well as the necessary supports for their use in classrooms.
- Ensure that local leaders have access to student assessment data in aggregate and by subgroup, and across classrooms and schools, as well as support (as needed) in interpreting data to drive decision making.
- Ensure that leaders have the understanding and capacity to apply systemic approaches/systems thinking across other curricular areas and build alignment between multiple school-wide approaches.
- Embed literacy efforts and practices into the continuous improvement plan.
- Create or strengthen a systems-wide approach to supporting positive student behaviors based on best practices.
- Engage in ongoing quality and continuous improvement (PreK through grade 3) with focus on strategies to address gaps in learning, equity and access, transitions PreK to K, and goals for grade-level reading.
- Leverage school resources to ensure efficient, effective practices surrounding language and literacy instruction and intervention.

Align school policies and practices to support literacy initiatives.

RESOURCES:

[Vermont AOE Multi-Tiered System of Supports webpage.](#)

Bornfreund, L. & Lieberman, A. (2016). [*Bringing It All Together: Elementary Principals are Key to Strong PreK-third Grade Classrooms*](#). Washington, DC: New America.

[*Expanding and Strengthening Best-Practice Supports for Students Who Struggle: Preliminary Highlights for Discussion*](#). Boston, MA: District Management Group. National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) (2014).

[*Leading PreK-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice*](#). Alexandria, VA: National Association of Elementary School Principals. Szekely, A. (2013).

[*Leading for Early Success: Building School Principals' Capacity to Lead High-Quality Early Education*](#). Washington, DC: National Governors Association.

2. Effective Collaboration: A Culture of Collaboration

- Identify and share strategies to support and guide parents of young children with their children's learning.
- Provide out of school time activities that include early language and literacy experiences.
- Create and sustain community connections with organizations that can support early literacy.
- Create and sustain partnerships with PreK service providers to support language/literacy development and kindergarten readiness.
- Create and sustain parent/family partnerships that support language/literacy proficiency.
- Build processes to support a seamless transition from PreK to kindergarten.

State Recommendation

- Utilize Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) funds to support alignment across early education providers and elementary schools to include plans for continuous literacy supports across transition to school.
- Promote a statewide campaign for daily reading 15 min. every child every day. (Promoted by education organizations statewide.)
- Provide training to 21st Century program with local site coordinators on early language and literacy experiences to implement in their programs.
- Build understanding of, and alignment between, the Agency of Human Services (AHS) and AOE regulations related to PreK providers.
- Develop technical assistance (TA) materials, webinars, and outreach materials for LEAs related to parent and community engagement.

- Maintain and review VELs document and activities surrounding literacy and promotion of the VELs website and resources
- Promote review and use of the VELs calendar.

Local Recommendation

- Ensure that early care and education providers and local schools develop plans to support children’s transition into kindergarten, including a focus on supporting literacy development during the transition.
- Ensure that early care and education providers across the local community are aligned, and (as possible) share resources and access to effective professional learning opportunities.
- Utilize community partners to promote literacy activities, including daily reading.
- Develop relationships with local public and private early care and education program providers.
- Develop plans and opportunities to engage all families in school- and community-based literacy opportunities for young children.
- All staff are actively involved both formally and informally, in providing input and feedback throughout the implementation process.

RESOURCES:

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education. (2016). [*Policy statement on family engagement from the early years to the early grades.*](#)

Vermont AOE (2015) [*Publicly-Funded Prekindergarten Partnership Agreement.*](#)

Vermont AOE (2017). [*Title I Parent and Family Engagement Resources.*](#)

3. High-Quality Instruction and Intervention that is Responsive and Differentiated: A Culture of Instructional Excellence and Engagement

- Literacy curriculum is aligned with Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELs) and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts.
- Design of the literacy curriculum and plan for early literacy instruction and interventions reflect instructional practices that have been empirically shown to support gains in student achievement.
- Selection of instructional materials is based on rigorous research and standards.
- Focus on explicit and systematic instruction in foundational reading skills based on student need (e.g., phonemic awareness and phonics, fluency, academic vocabulary, comprehension, and writing).

- Exposure and access to high quality children’s literature, diverse in genre, culture, and differences is readily available.
- High quality children’s literature is respectful of students’ interests and is inclusive of modern day authors and themes.
- Instruction occurs in a print and language rich environment and emphasizes the importance of speaking, reading, and writing in the learning of all students.
- Students not reading on grade level receive intense and increased instructional supports with a certified teacher of reading for as long as it takes to acquire third grade-level reading, writing, speaking, and listening proficiency skills; students are not pulled from core content learning opportunities.
- A healthy and safe learning environment is established that is conducive to student engagement, student productivity, and intensive language/literacy instruction.

State Recommendation

- Establish and regularly reviews early learning standards to reflect latest knowledge about child learning and development.
- Specify a core of required curriculum and instructional expectations that are implemented in all schools statewide.
- Ensure any mandate for instruction, curriculum, or assessment is made with a strategy for funding (no unfunded mandates).
- Continuously examine how resources are allocated toward social and emotional priorities (e.g., identify where governance structures limit or allow for flexibility in resources allocation, and the strategic use of federal and local funds).
- Establish standards for safe and healthy schools.

Local Recommendation

- Ensure literacy curricula used in schools are aligned with VELs state standards.
- Select activities, strategies, and interventions to support the curriculum and are evidence-based for literacy instruction.
- Ensure a curriculum-aligned assessment of literacy is included PreK through third grade.
- Ensure coherence and consistency within schools locally in what interventions are adopted and when to meet student literacy learning needs (reduce school to school variability).
- Ensure modern, high-quality children’s literature is available in classrooms.
- Time and space are provided for student engagement that includes connecting, interacting, and responding to literature with peers, both speaking and in writing.

- Program-wide expectations that apply to adults and children are developed and established with input from families. These expectations are:
- Developmentally appropriate supporting the social, emotional and learning needs of all children; **b.** Functional in both home and classroom settings and teachers assist families in the translation of these expectations to home; **c.** Shared in ways that are readily accessible to staff, families and children.
- Instruction is planned for and embedded in naturally occurring routines and activities (e.g., within large group activities, small group activities, with families and in individual interactions with children).
- Provide professional learning opportunities to instructional and other school staff on creating a warm and inclusive environment.
- Provide tools for schools to measure or monitor inclusivity.
- Practice and implement Positive Behavior Support (PBS) and Pyramid Model strategies.

Report and act on school climate survey data.

RESOURCES:

Vermont AOE (2018). Memo on PreK Suspension and Expulsion Data Collection and Reporting (September 13, 2018).

Vermont AOE (2018). [*Awareness and Action: Reducing Suspension and Expulsion in Early Childhood.*](#)

Vermont AOE (2017). [*Title IVa Allowable Activities.*](#)

Vermont AOE (2017). [*Title IVa Technical Assistance.*](#)

Vermont Agency of Education (2016). *Vermont State Board of Education, Manual of Rules and Practices, Series 2000 – [*Education Quality Standards.*](#)* Vermont Agency of Education.

4. Comprehensive and Balanced Assessments: A Culture of Data Informed Decision Making

- Student proficiency increases when expert professionals analyze and use ongoing performance data to inform decisions and provide instruction that is responsive.
- Ensure that assessments are developmentally appropriate for young children (i.e., purposeful in design, use, and interpretation; clearly and explicitly integrated into the overall system, including curriculum and instruction, and represent the valued outcomes on which instruction is focused; and are beneficial in that they serve to optimize learning time and resources).

- Use valid and reliable standardized literacy assessments (including screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring instruments) to determine the need for early literacy intervention.
- Ensure that progress monitoring assessments are aligned with instructional content and used to track students' response to intervention and inform intervention placement.

State Recommendation

- Select valid and reliable assessments for the purpose of statewide assessment, including kindergarten readiness assessments, formative assessments, and required grade-level accountability testing.
- Utilize an integrated longitudinal data system to link data across statewide systems and schools over time to guide decision making.

Local Recommendation

- Ensure local leaders have access to student test data and appropriate support in how to interpret results to guide decision making.
- Evaluate the efficacy of interventions as they are used for each student, to make any changes in intervention(s) received.
- Examine assessment data for subgroup difference as well as score trends over time.
- Ensure educator access to individual student assessment data and support in translating results into instructional decision making.
- Ensure data is reliable.
- Integrate data from classrooms, schools, and supervisory level to facilitate planning and instructional decision making.
- Align assessments with curriculum.

RESOURCES:

Dolezal, L., Grube, M., & Bettale Watterson, T. (2017). [*Strengthening and Streamlining Local Comprehensive Assessment Systems: Guidelines and Support for Leadership Teams*](#). Vermont Agency of Education.

McCarthy, K., & Rogers, K. (2018). [*Vermont's Early Childhood Outcomes: Practices and Procedures*](#). Vermont Agency of Education.

McCarthy, K. (2017). [*Vermont's Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment System Framework*](#). Vermont Agency of Education.

5. Expertise: A Culture that Builds Expertise

- The foundation for effective problem solving and instructional decision making is a dynamic, positive, and productive **collaboration** among students, families, and professionals.
- **Ongoing professional learning** for *all members of the school community* is needed to build capacity and sustain progress.
- Provide for equity and access to high quality early language/literacy teachers for each and every child, PreK through third grade.
- Instructional staff meet highest standards, certification, validation requirements for language and literacy instruction PreK through grade three.
- Develop, implement, and improve rigorous, transparent, and fair evaluation and support systems for early childhood educators PreK through third grade.

State Recommendation

- Maintain a licensing and credentialing system that ensures literacy training for teachers certified to teach students PreK-third grade.
- Support institutions of higher education to train an adequate number of early educators to ensure all children have access to highly prepared teachers.
- Identify and recognize evidence-based programs aligned with ESSA requirements.
- Provide centrally located information, or research bank, for evidence-based practices.
- Develop and recognize PreK through third grade literacy certification for teachers.

Local Recommendation

- Ensure teachers have access to embedded professional learning supports, including literacy coaches.
- Manage assignments to ensure that classrooms with students PreK–third grade have teachers with a credential specific to the PreK and early elementary years.
- Support communities of practice for teachers within and across schools to focus on early literacy instruction and support.

RESOURCES:

Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators (2018). [*Rules Governing the Licensing of Educators and the Preparation of Educational Professionals*](#). Vermont Agency of Education.

Vermont Standards Board of Professional Educators (2018). [*A Vision for Teaching, Leading, and Learning – Core Teaching and Leadership Standards for Vermont Educators*](#). Vermont Agency of Education.

The Vermont Task Force on Teacher & Leader Effectiveness (ND). [*Vermont Guidelines for Teacher & Leader Effectiveness*](#). Vermont Agency of Education.

Vermont Agency of Education (2017). [*Coaching as Professional Learning: Guidelines for Implementing Effective Coaching Systems*](#). Vermont Agency of Education.

Vermont AOE (2017). [*Title IIA Allowable Activities*](#).

6. Culture of Continuous Improvement and Decision-making for Excellence and Equity

- Instruction and intervention are culturally sensitive, based on solid research, and allow teachers to use formative assessment and keen observation to engage in responsive teaching.
- All children regardless of their specific learning needs are guaranteed access to the general education curriculum and specially designed accommodations and modifications.
- English learners have access to a research-based system of services within an early childhood program designed to ensure high-quality, effective language, and literacy instruction for English language learners (ELLs) and children who speak only English.
- Children in low-income conditions receive special assistance and services to address factors that contribute to third-grade reading proficiency, including school readiness programs, efforts to reduce chronic absence, summer learning opportunities, and high-quality teaching.
- Align classroom practices and professional learning opportunities with language and literacy instruction priorities, all with strong research-based support.
- Accurately use data to identify successes and challenges, make meaningful adjustments, and impact language and literacy proficiency.

State Recommendation

- Clearly articulate a statement of commitment to inclusivity and support for diverse students and their families.
- Develop plans for hiring and retaining teachers that reflect the populations of students and families served by schools, including those from non-English speaking households.
- Curate a database of literacy materials that reflect cultural and linguistic diversity. Literacy resources reflect the breadth and depth of diversity.
- Maintain an available, single-stop site for resources to support the needs of diverse families.

Local Recommendation

- Use valid and reliable methods to identify struggling readers and children in need of targeted services.
- Ensure all schools have access to professional staff prepared to support special instructional needs of children with disabilities.
- Develop communications between schools and families in languages reflecting cultural backgrounds of students.
- Provide training on diversity awareness, including implicit bias, and working with all students and colleagues.
- Develop and maintain a set of available resources to support each and every child.

RESOURCES:

District Management Group (2017). [*Expanding and Strengthening Best-Practice Supports for Students Who Struggle: Preliminary Highlights for Discussion*](#). Boston, MA: District Management Group.

U.S. Departments of Education (ED) and Health and Human Services (HHS) (2015). [*Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs*](#). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Vermont Department of Education (2010). [*English Language Learners in Vermont: Distinguishing Language Difference from Disability - A Resource Guide*](#). Montpelier, VT: Author.

Vermont AOE (2017). [*Title I Allowable Activities*](#).

Vermont AOE (2017). [*McKinney-Vento Allowable Activities*](#).

Vermont AOE (2017). [*Title IIIa Allowable Activities*](#).

[*Vermont Guiding Principles for the Full Participation of Each and Every Young Child and Their Family \(2017\)*](#)

End Notes

¹[The Vermont Statutes Online](#)

²For example, see The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2013). [Early Warning Confirmed: A Research Update on Third-Grade Reading](#). Baltimore, MD.

³While this Blueprint focuses specifically on literacy development among children PreK through third grade, Vermont recognizes the inter-related nature of learning across all domains of development and learning. Young children learn within social contexts and language and literacy skill development occur in the context of other areas of development, as outlined in the Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS).

⁴See 16 V.S.A § 2903.

⁵[2018 SBAC](#) data.

⁶[2017 SBAC](#) data.

⁷[2017-2018 R4K!S](#) data.

⁸ The [Guiding Principles](#) is also provided at the front of the *Blueprint*.

⁹ See, for example, National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction. Reports of the subgroups*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; and Partnership for Reading. (2003). *Put reading first: The research building blocks for teaching children to read. Kindergarten through grade 3*. Washington, DC: Author.

¹⁰ Cates, Carolyn Brockmeyer, Adriana Weisleder, and Alan L. Mendelsohn. [Mitigating the effects of family poverty on early child development through parenting interventions in primary care](#). *Academic pediatrics* 16.3 (2016): S112-S120.

¹¹Cates, Carolyn; Weisleder, Adriana; Dreyer, Benard; Johnson, Matthew; Seery, Anne; Canfield, Caitlin F.; Berkule Johnson, Samantha; and Mendelsohn, Alan L. *Reading with children starting in infancy gives lasting literacy boost: Shared book-reading that begins soon after birth may translate into higher language and vocabulary skills before elementary school*. (May 2017) American Academy of Pediatrics.

¹² See for example, Moats, L. C. (1999). [Teaching reading is rocket science](#). Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers.

¹³Norton, D., & Norton, S. (2010). *Through the eyes of a child: An introduction to children's literature* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Prentice-Hall.

¹⁴ For a review of instruction for children in PreK–3, see Lesaux, N. (2013). *PreK–3rd: Getting literacy instruction right* ([PreK–Third Policy to Action Brief No. 9](#)). New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development.

¹⁵ See, for example, McGuinness, D. (2006). *Early reading instruction: What science really tells us about how to teach reading*. MIT Press.

¹⁶For a detailed review of literacy instruction in K-3, see Foorman, B., Beyler, N., Borradaile, K., Coyne, M., Denton, C. A., Dimino, J., Furgeson, J., Hayes, L., Henke, J., Justice, L., Keating, B., Lewis, W., Sattar, S., Streke, A., Wagner, R., & Wissel, S. (2016). *Foundational skills to support reading for understanding in kindergarten through third grade* (NCEE 2016-4008). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from the [NCEE website](#) and Christie, J. F. (2008). The scientifically based reading research approach to early literacy instruction. In L. M. Justice & C. Vukelich (Eds.), *Solving problems in the teaching of literacy. Achieving excellence in preschool literacy instruction* (pp. 25-40). New York, NY, US: Guilford Press.

¹⁷See see Lesaux, N. (2013). [PreK-third: Getting literacy instruction right \(PreK-third Policy to Action Brief No. 9\)](#). New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development.

¹⁸See for example, see Lesaux, N. (2013). [PreK-third: Getting literacy instruction right \(PreK-third Policy to Action Brief No. 9\)](#). New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development.

¹⁹See [PreK-third: What goes into effective reading comprehension \(PreK-third Policy to Action Brief No. 2\)](#). New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development.

²⁰See Vermont Early Learning Standards (2015). Vermont Agency of Education.

²¹See McCardle, P. & Chhabra, V. (Eds.) (2004). *The voice of evidence in reading research*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.

²²See National Center on Improving Literacy. (2018). [What do we mean by evidence-based?](#)

Appendices

Appendix A Definition of Terms

Code-based reading skills – The set of skills that are considered the “mechanics” of reading. These include knowing the letters of the alphabet (called alphabet knowledge), and concepts of print, such as the direction of text on a page. They also include the ability to automatically map letters to their sounds (alone or in combinations). This includes skills often referred as phonemic awareness skills.

Early Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Pyramid Model (Early MTSS) - Early MTSS is two-prong in its approach to ensure systems building capacity and practice implementation. Early MTSS promotes evidence-based practice implementation to fidelity utilizing the nationally renowned Pyramid Model tiered framework of evidence-based practices of promotion, prevention, and intervention. This tiered framework is the model for delivering information about evidence-based practices, strategies, and resources to families and early childhood practitioners. The framework was developed by two federally funded research and training centers: The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) and the Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention (TACSEI). The Early MTSS Systems Inventory process includes a rating system as well as a place to identify priority areas for improvement. A separate document, the Early MTSS DATA Summary and Goal Setting Tool, allows leaders to set goals based on the results of the Program Inventory.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – This is the common name for the latest reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act that provides funding to support public elementary and secondary schools through the state.

Evidence-based - An intervention, tool, or practice that meets one of the four evidence levels in the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by ESSA (strong, moderate, promising, or demonstrates a rationale).

Historically marginalized students – Those students who have been historically underserved by educational institutions for any one, or more than one, characteristic including ethnic and racial minorities, English Learners, students with Free and Reduced Lunch, students with disabilities, and students who are migrant, foster, or homeless.

Literacy – Generally defined as the ability to read and write well. In the Vermont Early Learning Standards, Literacy includes several components: Foundational Reading Skills; Reading (Engagement with Literature and Informational Text), Writing, and for English Learners/Dual Language Learners, Literacy in English.

Meaning-based reading skills – A set of skills including oral language, vocabulary, and listening comprehension that relate to understanding the meaning of text.

PreK–3 – For the purposes of this document, PreK-3 (or PreK-third grade) refers to children eligible for PreK services in Vermont through the third grade. It also refers to those classrooms and teachers serving these children, as well as other individuals

Smarter-Balanced Assessment – Statewide assessments in English language arts and mathematics administered each year to students in grades 3-8 and in grade 9. The assessments are developed to describe student achievement in each area using four levels of proficiency: substantially below proficient, partially proficient, proficient, proficient with distinction.

Appendix B

Detailed State Context

To be successful, a comprehensive state literacy plan must recognize a range of existing state systems and policy initiatives to ensure that it is both consistent with and able to be integrated into them. Collectively these serve as valuable resources available at the state level, as well as across the state at the supervisory union level to affect development and implementation of a comprehensive statewide plan. By integrating existing policies and systems, the comprehensive plan both reinforces the system of education for young children while also identifying potential synergies in implementing the statewide action plan. There are several critical components to education in Vermont that must align with the comprehensive early literacy plan. These are discussed briefly below.

[16 V.S.A. § 2903 \(a-c\) Preventing early school failure; reading instruction](#)

Foundation for literacy. The State Board of Education, in collaboration with the Agency of Human Services, higher education, literacy organizations, and others, shall develop a plan for establishing a comprehensive system of services for early education in the first three grades to ensure that all students learn to read by the end of the third grade. The plan shall be updated at least once every five years following its initial submission in 1998.

[Supporting Each and Every Young Child and Family's Full and Equitable Participation \(2017\)](#)

The Vermont AOE recognizes and respects the diversity of the young children and their families across the state and their right to equitable participation in education. This document outlines Vermont's commitment "...to fully include each and every child and their family in a continuum of meaningful experiences to ensure their health, mental health, safety, happiness, and success now and into the future." It provides Guiding Principles for individuals, organizations, and communities to understand and that "highlight explicit, intentional, and strengths-based practices that are respectful of and responsive to child, family, and community values, priorities, and beliefs."

The Vermont Education Quality Standards

Officially known as State Board Rule 2000, School Quality Standards, the current Education Quality Standards (EQS) were implemented in 2014 to ensure that "all students in Vermont public schools are afforded educational opportunities that are substantially equal in quality, and enable them to achieve or exceed the standards approved by the [State Board of Education](#). The EQS effectively captures two fundamental ideals – equity of opportunity for all students and a focus on the learning standards applicable to all Vermont children.

The Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS)

The Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS) are a resource for families, teachers, caregivers, administrators, and policy makers to provide a single unified response to two questions:

- What should children know and be able to do to prepare them to succeed in school and in life?
- What experiences would support young children in homes, schools, and communities to help them gain the knowledge and skills that prepare them for school and life?

The answers to these questions, articulated through the standards, provide a common language to describe developmentally, age appropriate expectations for children across their early years, from birth to third grade, in all [essential areas of development and learning](#). They underlie critical decisions about early childhood education programs, including the development and selection of program-wide curriculum and educational strategies. The standards, "... are central to the shared vision of what we want for young children in Vermont and highlight the importance of high-quality early childhood experiences as the foundation for school success and lifelong learning."

The current iteration of the [VELS](#) was approved by the Vermont State Board of Education in August 2015. They reflect changes in Vermont's early childhood landscape including expansion of access to public prekindergarten (PreK) and implementation and alignment of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English Language Arts and Mathematics, the Next Generation Science Standards, the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) competencies to support curriculum and instruction. Through the efforts of cross-agency and local stakeholders the VELS as reflect current knowledge of early childhood development. Finally, the VELS are reflective of Vermont's commitment to comprehensive education for each and every young child.

[Universal PreK \(Act 166\)](#)

Act 166 of 2014 provides for universal access to publicly funded prekindergarten education. All public and private prekindergarten (PreK) education programs, including Head Start and public school operated programs, must meet specific requirements to operate a PreK program in Vermont. The Agency of Education, in collaboration with the Agency of Human Services, created administrative rules to guide Act 166 implementation.

Under the law, children are eligible for Universal PreK if the child is 3- or 4-years old, or 5-years-old but age eligible for kindergarten. Eligible children receive services in public and private PreK settings, including Head Start, public school, private centers, and home programs that are prequalified to provide Universal PreK in Vermont. The law further defines PreK education programs as those "designed to provide developmentally appropriate early

development and learning experiences based on Vermont’s Early Learning Standards ...” As a result, PreK programs must be aligned to the VELs in order to gain and maintain prequalification. Administrative oversight for Vermont’s Universal PreK is provided by the Agency of Education following the administrative rules developed in collaboration with the [Agency of Human Services](#).

Early Childhood Special Education and Special Education

The Agency of Education has overarching responsibility for compliance with the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the corresponding Vermont state regulations regarding the provision of a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students with disabilities. To accomplish this task, the Agency of Education’s Special Education and Early Childhood Special Education Coordinators are charged with assuring that all Vermont public and independent schools and early childhood education programs educate students with disabilities consistent with the content and intent of the law.

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) services support children ages 3 up to 6 years. ECSE is administered through local school districts to ensure full access and participation in early childhood programs for each and every child who is determined eligible for services. ECSE and Special Education services enable young children with disabilities to be full participants in everyday routines and activities across a variety of settings (in their homes with their families, in child care, preschool, school programs, and in the community) throughout the early childhood years.

[Vermont Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment System Framework](#)

Vermont recognizes the importance of assessment during the early childhood years and has developed a comprehensive assessment framework to guide early childhood programs and their stakeholders in ensuring that assessments are used effectively to make informed decisions. The state has recognized that such a system “...will ensure Vermont children, birth through grade 3, reach their maximum learning potential by utilizing evidence-based, developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate assessment methods.” The state developed the Vermont Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment System (VECCAS) specifically to map early childhood assessments commonly used across the state, their alignment with the Vermont Early Learning Standards, and the systematic means by which assessments can be organized to ensure they provide critical data for early education stakeholders (teachers, program directors, and policy makers) to make informed decisions.

The Framework captures the range of assessment purposes recognized as part of best practice in early childhood, including diagnostic, developmental screening and surveillance, formative assessment, summative assessment of children, environmental quality and the quality of adult-

child relationships in early childhood settings. Importantly, the Framework also provide guidance to programs in when and how to conduct different types of assessments, indicating how the results can inform decisions.

The VECCAS is a fluid and changing document. Over time the numerous assessments will be integrated into a coherent system of data that can be used to support early learning by informing educational decisions and practices. Vermont's PreK programs share a common research-based assessment system, Teaching Strategies GOLD, which aligns with the VELs, and has solidified for early educators the link between instruction and learning. In addition, Vermont utilizes the Ready for Kindergarten! Survey (R4K!S) to obtain teacher ratings on kindergartener's their students' knowledge and skills across five domains: Physical Development and Health; Social-Emotional Development; Approaches to Learning; Communication; and, Cognitive Development. These data provide important information to teachers' planning learning experiences for their classrooms.

Vermont Multi-tiered System of Supports (VTmtss)

A **Multi-Tiered System of Supports** is a **framework** that unifies educational opportunities and supports to improve outcomes and ensure equity for all students.

The VTmtss Framework is a systemic approach to decision-making for excellence and equity within a culture of continuous improvement that focuses on successful outcomes for all students. This systemic approach:

- Supports the collaboration of all adults to meet the academic, behavioral, social, and emotional needs of all students.
- Provides a layered continuum of high quality, evidence-based instruction, intervention, and assessment practices matched to student strengths and needs
- Relies on the effective and timely use of meaningful data
- Helps districts and their schools organize resources to accelerate the learning of every student
- Engages and develops the collective expertise of educators, students, family and community partnerships

center on key practices related to the professional, instructional, organizational, and cultural capacities necessary in schools to enable successful implementation of an MTSS, such as collaboration, distributed leadership, and use of data to monitor progress and inform and differentiated instruction. These include:

- A Systemic and Comprehensive Approach
 - A Culture of Systemic Improvement
- Effective Collaboration
 - A Culture of Collaboration
- High-quality Instruction and Intervention that is Responsive and Differentiated
 - A Culture of Instructional Excellence and Engagement
- Comprehensive and Balanced Assessment System
 - A Culture of Data-Informed Decision Making
- Expertise
 - A Culture that Builds Expertise

The [VTmtss Field Guide](#) is the State’s guidelines to the field on the Framework, 10 principles, and components of MTSS in Vermont. It is intended to “provoke conversation, provide information about effective practices, and support collaborative and systemic efforts to improve outcomes for all students.” The [VTmtss Field Guide](#) includes:

- Enhanced discussion of Social-emotional concerns, Specific Learning Disability determination
- An explicit discussion on Cultural contributions to school improvement
- Practical Matters discussions for each Component
- A new section that addresses how to use the Systemic and Comprehensive Approach for Continuous Improvement and Problem Solving
- Vignettes that demonstrate what this might look like and how the VTmtss Framework can be used to address questions and make decisions
- Updated self-assessment tools for Schools or School Districts

Expanding and Strengthening Best-practice Supports for Students Who Struggle report

Vermont AOE is focused on ensuring that the needs of all students, both with and without IEPs, are being met to enable all students to achieve at high levels. The District Management Group (DMG) conducted a service delivery [study](#) to determine best practices to improve the effectiveness, availability, and equity of services for students who struggle, both with and without IEPs during the 2016-17 school year. The group looked at the findings from their interviews, observations and reviews of educator activities and compared them with evidence-based best practices. From this they identified five opportunities for improving services and supports for students:

1. Ensure elementary core instruction meets most needs of most students;
2. Provide additional instructional time outside core subjects aligned to the core instruction, to students who struggle, rather than providing interventions instead of core instruction;
3. Ensure students who struggle receive all instruction from highly skilled teachers;
4. Create or strengthen a systems-wide approach to supporting positive student behaviors based on expert support; and
5. Provide students having more intensive support needs with specialized instruction from skilled and trained experts.

These opportunities are central to VT AOE's efforts at ensuring educational equity for all students and help to frame the design for how the state will allocate resources to schools under provisions under [Act 173](#) of 2018.

Early MTSS

Begun in 2007, Early MTSS aligns with the [VTmtss Framework](#). It provides “a full-continuum of professional learning opportunities and implementation of evidence-based practices to support infant, toddlers, and young children’s social-emotional, early literacy, and early mathematics competence, confidence and ultimate success in school and community.”

By intentionally aligning the VTmtss framework principles across the PreK to K transition, early MTSS ensures consistency of service for participating children.

Appendix C

Research Resources: How Children Learn to Read

This appendix provides very brief summaries of several publications that substantially capture research consensus relevant to early literacy development.

1. National Reading Panel Report

This comprehensive report systematically identified the best, research-based, information about how children learn to read. The report was compiled by a national panel of experts charged with exploring the research basis for what had become commonly held beliefs about how children learn to read.

The Panel found:

- To become good readers, children must develop several types of literacy skills: phonemic awareness; phonics skills; the ability to read words in text in an accurate and fluent manner; and, the ability to consciously and deliberately apply comprehension strategies as they read.
- *Systematic* and *explicit* instruction in phonemic awareness lead directly to improvements in children's reading and spelling skills.
- *Phonics instruction* produces significant benefits for children K- 6th grade and for children having difficulty learning to read. The greatest improvements were seen from systematic phonics instruction (teaching a planned sequence of phonics elements, rather than as they appear in a text).
- Because children vary in reading ability, no single approach to teaching phonics can be used. Therefore, it is important to train teachers in the different kinds of approaches to teaching phonics and in how to tailor these approaches to groups of students based upon learning needs.
- Children at-risk of reading failure especially require direct and systematic instruction in these skills, and that instruction should be provided as early as possible.
- Guided oral reading (out loud, to a parent, teacher or other student, who corrects their mistakes and provides feedback) is important for developing reading fluency.
- Research cannot distinguish whether independent silent reading improves reading skills or that good readers simply prefer to read silently to themselves more than do poor readers. If silent reading is used, it should be combined with other types of reading instruction.

- Vocabulary should be taught both directly — apart from a larger narrative or text — and indirectly — as words are encountered in a larger text. Repetition and multiple exposure to vocabulary words also assist vocabulary development.

Reference:

Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS. (2000). [Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read](#) (00-4769). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

2. *National Early Literacy Panel Report*

The National Early Literacy Panel sought to identify statistically significant early predictors of later literacy skills among children from birth to third grade.

The panel set out first to establish which early skills or abilities are precursors of later literacy. They identified 11 variables consistently predicted later literacy achievement for both preschoolers and kindergartners. These include:

1. alphabet knowledge - knowing of the names and sounds associated with printed letters
2. phonological awareness - the ability to detect, manipulate, or analyze the auditory aspects of spoken language (including the ability to distinguish or segment words, syllables, or phonemes), independent of meaning
3. rapid automatic naming of letters or digits: the ability to rapidly name a sequence of random letters or digits
4. rapid automatic naming of objects or colors: the ability to rapidly name a sequence of repeating random sets of pictures of objects (e.g., “car,” “tree,” “house,” “man”) or colors
5. writing or writing name: the ability to write letters in isolation on request or to write one’s own name
6. phonological memory: the ability to remember spoken information for a short period of time
7. concepts about print: knowledge of print conventions (e.g., left–right, front–back) and concepts (book cover, author, text)
8. print knowledge: a combination of elements of alphabet knowledge, concepts about print, and early decoding

9. reading readiness: usually a combination of alphabet knowledge, concepts of print, vocabulary, memory, and phonological awareness
10. oral language: the ability to produce or comprehend spoken language, including vocabulary and grammar
11. visual processing: the ability to match or discriminate visually presented symbols.

The panel also considered the effectiveness of different types of instruction and interventions. They found that:

- Code-focused instructional efforts (focused on phonemic awareness) produce moderate to large effects across a broad spectrum of early literacy outcomes.
- Book sharing interventions (including simple shared reading and those that encourage forms of reader-child interactions during reading) produce moderate-sized effects on children’s print knowledge and oral language skills.

These findings suggest many things that parents, and teachers can do to improve early literacy development. Importantly, interventions that produced large and positive effects were usually conducted as one-on-one or small-group instructional activities. These activities tended to be teacher-directed and focused on helping children learn skills by engaging in the use of those skills.

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Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS. (2010). [Early Beginnings: Early Literacy Knowledge and Instruction: A guide for early childhood administrators and professional development providers](#). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

3. Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children

This book discusses the potential causes and consequences of reading problems. It considers young children’s reading difficulties along social, historical, cultural, and biological dimensions. The book provides recommendations for the identification of groups of children at risk, effective instruction for preschool and early grades, and effective approaches to dialects and bilingualism. The book considers ways this research can be used to improve the preparation and professional learning of teachers.

Reference:

National Research Council (1998). [Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children](#). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

4. National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth (2006)

This report summarizes the findings of a national panel of 13 experts in second-language development, cognitive development, curriculum and instruction, assessment, and methodology to review the quantitative and qualitative research on the development of literacy in language-minority students.

The panel followed a rigorous methodology to identify and review research on how children learn to read between birth and age 5. The report provides details behind several key findings (quoted from the report):

- Instruction that provides substantial coverage in the key components of reading—identified by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension—has clear benefits for language-minority students.
- Instruction in the key components of reading is necessary—but not sufficient—for teaching language-minority students to read and write proficiently in English. Oral proficiency in English is critical as well—but student performance suggests that it is often overlooked in instruction.
- Oral proficiency and literacy in the first language can be used to facilitate literacy development in English.
- Individual differences contribute significantly to English literacy development.
- Most assessments do a poor job of gauging individual strengths and weaknesses.
- There is surprisingly little evidence for the impact of sociocultural variables on literacy achievement or development. However, home language experiences can have a positive impact on literacy achievement.

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5. *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*

This report brings together research findings on how young children learn and the impact of early learning on later outcomes. Research focuses on: the interplay of biology and environment; variations in learning among individuals and children from different groups; the importance of health, safety, and nutrition; and, and social and emotional contributions to early learning. The book also discusses teacher-child relationship, the organization and content of curriculum, meeting the needs of those children most at risk of school failure, teacher preparation, assessment of teaching and learning, and more.

Reference:

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Appendix D

Research Resources: Identified Best Practices

1. A Systemic and Comprehensive Approach: A Culture of Continuous Growth and Improvement

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Lovejoy, A. (2013). [A governor’s guide to early literacy: getting all students reading by third grade](#). National Governor’s Association 2013.

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[SWIFT MTSS Starter Kit](#)

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3. High-quality Instruction and Intervention that is Responsive and Differentiated: A Culture of Instructional Excellence and Engagement

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[VT Early Learning Standards](#)

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