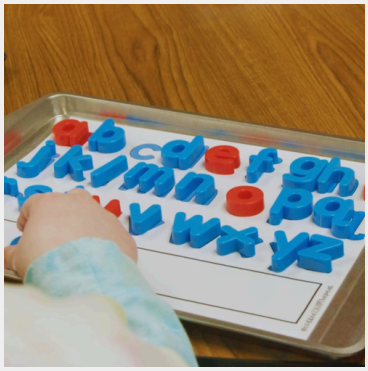
KENTUCKY READING RESEARCH CENTER

ANNUAL REPORT





2026







PROVEN PATHS to LITERACY

A Message from the Executive Director



When the Kentucky Reading Research Center was established two years ago, we knew the Commonwealth was facing a serious literacy challenge. Too many students were struggling to read, with many performing at the novice level. We knew this wasn't just an issue that affects students today; it was critical to Kentucky's future.

To address this challenge, education leaders and policymakers are making significant investments and establishing policies to promote evidence-based literacy instruction.

Our role at the Center is to examine the effects of these efforts. Specifically, we ask whether are students benefitting, what is working well and what is not, where we can improve, and most importantly, what Kentucky can learn from its experience.

We've spent a busy year answering those questions, and we're encouraged by the progress we're seeing across the Commonwealth.

Between 2022 and 2025, Kentucky ranked fifth among 35 states for academic growth in reading on the Education Recovery Scorecard, the national tracker for student achievement in reading and math. Kentucky was also identified as one of several states where literacy gains were associated with state-level early literacy reforms and initiatives tied to the science of reading.

Through our research, we learned that Kentucky schools with higher percentages of teachers trained in the LETRS literacy educator professional learning had significantly more students reaching the "Proficient" level in reading on the Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA). Further, our evaluation of the Kentucky Read to Achieve (RTA) Reading Diagnostic and Intervention Fund grant program found that RTA funds were critical factors affecting improved literacy instruction across all tiers.

Learning from the people who teach reading every day is essential to our research and has taken us into classrooms and conversations with educators across the Commonwealth. We've shared resources and listened to teachers and school leaders about what they are seeing and experiencing in their schools.

We're grateful to our partners at the Kentucky Department of Education and the policymakers who have made literacy a priority, to school and district leaders who are leading change, to educators who show up every day to help children learn to read, and to parents and caregivers who support their children along the way.

We're making great progress, but we have a long way to go. We're proud to be part of this work, and we look forward to continuing it together.

Terry Scott, Ph.D.

Executive Director,
Kentucky Reading Research Center

Professor and Distinguished University Scholar,
College of Education and Human Development, University of Louisville



Research → Resources → Reach → Impact.

During the 2026 fiscal year, the Kentucky Reading Research Center continued its work to support the state's charge to strengthen reading skills and improve literacy outcomes for students across the Commonwealth. We tripled the research-based resources available through our digital presence, while expanding our reach to educators, families, and decision-makers more than tenfold. The numbers below offer a snapshot of that growing impact.

5000+
educators, administrators, and district leaders reached at professional learning conferences and other meetings and gatherings across the Commonwealth

112
teachers participated in classroom observations and demonstrations as part of our research

100,000+
clicks to our Research Clearinghouse resources

6
renowned literacy experts serving on our National Advisory Board

17
major research reviews available in our Research Clearinghouse

149
Kentucky counties and school districts and 16 universities and colleges engaged with the Center through in-person or digital outreach

559
research studies related to emergent, foundational, and adolescent literacy synthesized in our Research Clearinghouse

3,000+
e-newsletter subscribers and social media followers

4
primary research focus areas explored, including foundational, adolescent, emergent, and adult literacy



Click this link or scan the QR code to read the full analysis.

LETRS Implementation in Kentucky

Our Analysis Links Teacher Training to Gains in Reading Proficiency

Our 2026 analysis of the Lexia® LETRS professional learning highlights the program's positive impact on student reading outcomes across the state. Since its launch through the Kentucky Reading Academies, more than 7,000 K–5 educators and administrators have participated in the no-cost LETRS training designed to strengthen literacy instruction.

Drawing on data from 574 elementary schools across 135 districts between the 2021–2022 and 2024–2025 school years, the study examined how LETRS participation relates to performance on the Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA). Using multiple analytical approaches—including regression modeling, group comparisons, and Difference-in-Differences analysis—the findings consistently point to one clear outcome: Schools with more LETRS-trained teachers see stronger gains in student reading proficiency.

Key Takeaways:

- **More LETRS-trained teachers = more proficient readers.** Schools with higher percentages of LETRS-trained teachers had significantly more students reaching the "Proficient" level in reading. This relationship held even when accounting for other school factors and prior performance.
- **Schools with more LETRS-trained teachers saw stronger and faster growth.** When schools were divided into two groups—those above the state average for LETRS-trained teachers and those below—the difference was noticeable. Schools above the average saw 4.26% growth in proficient readers from 2023 to 2025. Schools below the average saw 2.9% growth during the same period.
- **Struggling readers benefit from LETRS implementation.** Schools with more LETRS-trained teachers also experienced larger decreases in "Novice" readers. This suggests LETRS may be most effective at strengthening foundational reading skills and helping students reach grade-level expectations, rather than primarily increasing the number of top-performing students.

What This Means for Kentucky

LETRS training is helping move students into reading proficiency. This matters because the "Proficient" level represents students who are reading at grade level and prepared for future academic success. Even modest percentage gains translate into thousands of additional students reading on grade level across the state.

"LETRS has helped me to look at individual students and determine what support they need. It's aligned really well that the curriculum my school uses. And it allows teachers to take ownership of their instruction and use the strategies they know are research-based and most successful with their students."

Benjamin Courtney
Third Grade Teacher,
Cartmell Elementary School, Carroll County



Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings reinforce the value of expanding access to LETRS training as a strategy to improve literacy outcomes statewide. Future research could help decision makers better understand how classroom-level implementation of LETRS strategies translates into student success.

Overall, the analysis provides encouraging evidence that strengthening teacher knowledge through LETRS can help move more Kentucky students toward reading proficiency and narrow long-standing literacy gaps.

Opportunities for Future Research

Further research could strengthen understanding of LETRS effectiveness by focusing on:

- Classroom-level implementation
- How teachers apply LETRS instructional strategies
- Connections between specific literacy practices and student reading development

Recommendations for Decision Makers

- Expand access to LETRS professional learning to help close the statewide literacy gap.
- Encourage instructional alignment and support from school leadership to sustain literacy initiatives, align instruction, and build school-wide reading culture.
- Invest in data systems to track teacher training participation, measure classroom-level impacts, and strengthen future program evaluations.



Sangbaek Park, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Research,
Kentucky Reading Research Center
College of Education and Human Development, University of Louisville

Read to Achieve

What We're Learning About Stronger Literacy Systems

The Kentucky Reading Research Center's leading research project of the 2026 fiscal year was our annual evaluation of Kentucky's Read to Achieve (RTA) Reading Diagnostic and Intervention Grant program. The evaluation examines how schools use RTA funds, how educators experience the program, and how school-level practices and conditions may relate to student reading outcomes.

This year's evaluation went beyond the traditional survey of school personnel. In addition to gathering perspectives from educators across 149 RTA-funded schools, the Center conducted direct observations and interviews in a sample of schools to take a closer look at literacy team structures, instructional practices, and the systems schools have in place to support students across tiers of instruction.

RTA Funds are Making a Difference

The findings reinforce the value of RTA funding and the professional learning and resources it provides. Survey respondents among school personnel widely reported that RTA funds were critical for strengthening literacy instruction across Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 of Kentucky's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).

Teachers and reading interventionists also reported that the training and support provided through RTA improved their ability to deliver evidence-based reading instruction. At the same time, educators identified several areas where additional support could help strengthen literacy outcomes, including:

- More professional learning and instructional materials
- Training in student behavior management
- Video demonstrations showing what effective instructional strategies look like in practice

These findings suggest that continued investment in professional learning and practical, classroom-ready supports are an important component of helping schools sustain and strengthen their literacy instruction.

The survey was made available electronically from February 25 to June 5, 2025, and was distributed to all 149 schools receiving RTA funding in the 2024-25 school year.



Looking Beyond the Survey

A major goal of the evaluation was to better understand what may distinguish schools with different patterns of reading achievement. Schools with lower achievement and declining achievement trends were more likely to report higher rates of teacher turnover, greater numbers of inexperienced teachers, more student disruptions, and lower fidelity of Tier 1 literacy systems.

In contrast, schools with higher and improving achievement tended to have stronger Tier 1 systems, as reflected in their fidelity scores. Schools with lower achievement and declining trends tended to show somewhat higher Tier 3 fidelity. One possible explanation is that schools with less-developed Tier 1 systems rely more heavily on intensive Tier 3 supports for students who are not making adequate progress.

The analysis also found a moderate relationship between how schools use and share student data and their reading outcomes, but no single instructional practice was significantly associated with school-level achievement. The findings point to the complexity of improving school-level reading outcomes and the need to look beyond individual instructional practices to understand how staffing, professional learning, student needs, and implementation all work together.

A Foundation for Deeper Study

The evaluation represents an important step toward understanding not simply whether schools value RTA, but how the program operates within schools and what conditions may influence its effectiveness. Future research can build on this work by examining a larger number of schools and more closely exploring the relationships among school leadership, staffing stability, Tier 1 implementation, instructional practices, and student reading growth.

Key Takeaways

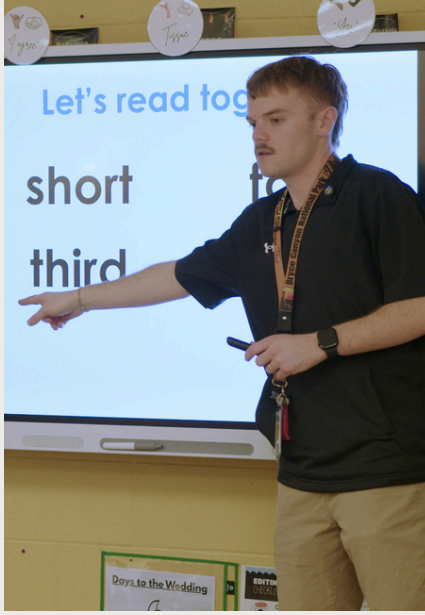
- Improving reading outcomes appears to depend on more than any single instructional practice.
- The strongest-performing schools in this evaluation tended to have more robust Tier 1 systems in place, strong school-wide systems, stable and experienced teachers, effective use of data, and the capacity to meet students' needs.
- Schools with lower and declining achievement faced greater challenges related to staffing, student behavior, and school-wide literacy instruction.



Amy Lingo, Ed.D.

Founding Director,
Kentucky Reading Research Center

Dean,
College of Education, Georgia Southern University



Click this link
or scan the QR code to read the full report.





Our Research Clearinghouse

Turning Evidence-Based Research into Action

The Kentucky Reading Research Center's Clearinghouse is designed to make high-quality literacy research easier to find, understand, and put into practice. To date, our researchers have reviewed and compiled findings from nearly **600 peer-reviewed studies to offer 17 research white papers covering foundational, adolescent, and emergent literacy for the Clearinghouse.** These white papers synthesize the evidence on important literacy topics, helping users move beyond individual studies to understand how the broader body of research translates into practice.

The Clearinghouse also translates this research into **Evidence Snapshots** tailored to four audiences: parents and caregivers, classroom teachers, educator preparation providers, and education and civic leaders. The goal is to meet people where they are and provide information they can use, whether they are planning classroom instruction, developing professional learning, making long-term decisions about curriculum and instruction, or supporting a student's reading development at home.

We're also working directly with Kentucky teachers to bring the research to life through **Evidence in Action videos**. These short videos show evidence-based strategies being used in real classrooms, giving educators an opportunity to see what the research looks like in practice and how to replicate instructional approaches with their own students.

The Clearinghouse will continue to expand, with adult literacy resources coming soon. As it grows, our goal is to create an easy-to-use, easy-to-navigate resource for anyone invested in helping students become successful readers. By connecting rigorous research with practical guidance and examples from Kentucky classrooms, the Clearinghouse is helping more people understand what works—and how to put that knowledge to use.

Click this link
or scan the QR code to view an Evidence in Action video demonstrating finger tapping.



Access Our Resources

We've created a series of concise, easy-to-use resources that translate research into practical guidance for educators, decision makers, and families. Available to download and print, our Evidence Snapshots can support instruction, planning, and informed decision-making. **Click this link** or scan the QR code to explore the collection.



Topics Covered in the Research Clearinghouse

Foundational Literacy

- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness Interventions
- K-3 Phonics Practices or Interventions
- Oral Fluency Interventions for K-3 Students
- Academic Vocabulary Knowledge Interventions
- Reading Comprehension Interventions for K-3 Students
- Content-Rich Reading Outcomes in Grades K-3
- Reading-Writing Connection: Integrated Literacy Instruction in K-3

Adolescent Literacy

- Multisyllabic Word Reading Interventions for Grades 4-9 Students
- Disciplinary Literacy Research on Adolescent Readers
- Adolescent Reading Comprehension Instruction and Intervention
- Adolescent Motivation and Engagement in Literacy Learning
- Text-Based Discussion Intervention Outcomes for Adolescent Readers
- Vocabulary Instruction for Adolescent Learners
- Reading Fluency Interventions for Students in Grades 4-9

Emergent Literacy

- Emergent Literacy Instruction Across Classroom Activities
- Supporting Print Awareness in Preschool Instruction
- Oral Language and Vocabulary Instruction for Preschoolers



Erin Hogan, Ph.D.

Co-Principal Investigator, Kentucky Reading Research Center

Assistant Professor, College of Education and Human Development, University of Louisville



Caitlin Criss, Ph.D

Co-Principal Investigator, Kentucky Reading Research Center

Associate Professor, College of Education, Georgia Southern University

From Research to Rehearsal

Strengthening Literacy Instruction Through Mixed-Reality Simulation

Translating evidence-based literacy research into effective classroom practice remains a persistent challenge in education. While educators may understand the principles of effective reading instruction, they also need opportunities to develop and refine the skills required to apply those principles in practice.

The Kentucky Reading Research Center is partnering with the University of Kentucky SimLab to help educators bridge that gap through mixed-reality simulations that allow teachers to practice evidence-based literacy instruction in a low-risk environment.

The partnership brings together the Center's research expertise and statewide literacy connections with UK SimLab's simulation technology. Together, the teams are developing practice-based learning experiences that give educators the opportunity to rehearse key instructional routines with virtual students, receive feedback, and refine their practice before bringing those skills into real classrooms.

Current simulations focus on core components of effective reading instruction, including:

- **Phonemic awareness and phonics:** practicing blending, segmenting, sound-symbol relationships, and decoding.
- **Fluency:** rehearsing routines such as repeated reading to support accuracy, rate, and prosody.
- **Vocabulary:** practicing explicit instruction, student-friendly explanations, contextual examples, and checks for understanding.
- **Comprehension:** developing students' ability to retell narratives and identify important story elements.

Key Takeaway:

Professional learning does not always translate into tools and methods for classroom instruction. Teachers need opportunities to practice new skills, receive feedback, and try again. Simulation provides that opportunity without the pressure or consequences of practicing for the first time with real students.

The Mixed-Reality Simulation Project is led by Todd Whitney, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Louisville and Co-Principal Investigator with the Kentucky Reading Research Center; and Kera Ackerman, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Special Education at the University of Kentucky College of Education.



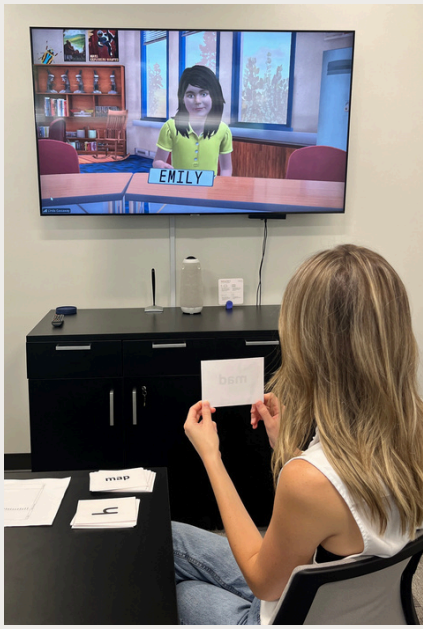
An Additional Layer of Support

The simulations also allow teachers to practice something that is difficult to replicate through coursework or traditional professional development: responding to students in real time. Virtual students may make errors, become confused, lose focus, and express frustration, all requiring teachers to provide corrective feedback, adjust their instruction, and maintain engagement.

Feedback from educators who have participated in the simulations suggests that these experiences increased their confidence and strengthened their ability to deliver quality instruction and better manage student behavior in the classroom. Just as important, the partnership creates greater coherence across research, teacher preparation, professional learning, and classroom practice.

The mixed-reality simulation also demonstrates the value of researcher–practitioner collaboration. Our researchers are engaging with teachers, district leaders, and literacy specialists to understand challenges in the field and use those insights to shape simulation experiences. This creates a feedback loop in which research informs professional learning, and educators' experiences help inform future research and resources.

The goal is not to replace classroom experience or coaching. Rather, simulations provide another layer of support that gives educators a chance to learn, rehearse, receive feedback, and refine before applying new practices with students.



Click this link

to learn more about the project.

Building Kentucky's Literacy Infrastructure

This partnership represents a broader vision to connect evidence with the systems and people responsible for putting that evidence into practice. By helping educators move from understanding evidence to confidently applying it, the Kentucky Reading Research Center and the UK SimLab are exploring a scalable approach to strengthening literacy instruction across Kentucky—and potentially offering a model for other states working to improve reading outcomes.



Todd Whitney, Ph.D.

Co-Principal Investigator,
Kentucky Reading Research Center

Associate Professor,
College of Education and Human Development, University of Louisville



About the Center

The Kentucky Reading Research Center is a partnership between the University of Louisville College of Education and Human Development and the Kentucky Department of Education. Established through Kentucky Revised Statute 164.0207, the Center supports educators in implementing evidence-based reading programs and promotes literacy development across the Commonwealth.

KENTUCKY READING RESEARCH CENTER

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