

Leadership Matters

March 2024



Elevating Literacy in Illinois

Illinois' New Comprehensive Literacy Plan



**Conference Showcase:
AASA in San Diego**

**Keep Students Learning
During Summer**

Elevating Literacy in Illinois

Illinois' new Comprehensive Literacy Plan provides a roadmap to enhance reading instruction

By Jason Nevel
IASA Director of Communications

IASA speaks to school leaders in Joliet PSD #86 and Herrin CUSD #4 about efforts to revamp literacy practices.

Teachers did not want a pendulum swing.

Dr. Theresa Rouse and her leadership team at Joliet PSD #86 recognized that reality early on. Pendulum swings in education—on everything from pedagogical practices and theories to curriculum, standards and assessment—can be tiresome and ineffective.

The challenge Joliet PSD #86 faced in 2019 is an issue many educators across the country are grappling with today. The elementary district of about 9,500 students, 95 percent of which come from low-income households, had languishing literacy scores and needed to change its approach.

For years, Joliet PSD #86 had utilized a Balanced Literacy Model, an instructional approach that involves a balance between teacher-led reading and writing instruction and independent learning.

However, the Balanced Literacy Model has come under increased scrutiny for not placing enough emphasis on phonics. In 2023 alone, state legislatures in 12 states enacted legislation to improve literacy through “science of reading” approaches.

The science of reading is an interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research that focuses on five key elements: comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, phonics and phonemic awareness. It is not a program, intervention or product schools can buy, but rather an ever-evolving approach that encourages schools to focus on the basic building blocks that students need to construct their knowledge and understanding when learning to read.

Joliet PSD #86 needed to find a middle ground. The result was the Joliet Public Schools District 86 Literacy Framework, which consists of eight core components: Speaking & Listening Skills, Phonological & Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, Writing, Building Knowledge and Comprehension.

The transition has started to yield encouraging results. On the STAR Early Literacy Assessment by Renaissance for grades K–1, just 25 percent of students met or exceeded benchmarks when tested in the Fall of 2023. However, by winter, that percentage doubled to 50 percent of students who met or exceeded the benchmark.

“We did not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater,” Dr. Rouse said. “We have to build upon what our teachers have, and what they’re comfortable with, but also expose them to some new ways of thinking and new ways to look at things.”

“ We have to shift literacy practices in Illinois. Let me be clear. This is not a mandate that will force you to go out and buy a new curriculum. ”

—Dr. Tony Sanders,
State Superintendent of Schools in Illinois



2024 Comprehensive Literacy Plan

Click [here](#) to read the full report.



wh sh th ck ch
f l s
all an am
old ild ind

Activity Independent work
Move in your
Participating hand
S

Unit 8 Words
helped lift hurting hurt
saw saw remark with
parties party

JOLIET
Joliet



Work through the problem on your own
Partner Work

“ In 2022...[only] slightly over 1 in 4 third graders in Illinois was reading on grade level.”

—*Illinois Assessment of Readiness Scores*

Comprehensive Literacy Plan

IASA spoke with administrators in Joliet PSD #86 (Three Rivers) and also Herrin CUSD #4 (Shawnee) to showcase two examples of districts that are experiencing encouraging results after changing approaches to teaching literacy.

The state of Illinois hopes other districts pursue similar initiatives to improve underwhelming data. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, only 1 in 3 third graders in Illinois was reading on grade level, according to Illinois Assessment of Readiness scores. In 2022, it was slightly over 1 in 4.

To address the issue, the Illinois State Board of Education adopted the Illinois Comprehensive Literacy Plan, a roadmap to enhance and unify core literacy instruction efforts statewide.

The plan does not advocate for any new mandates. Rather, its three main goals are to provide research-backed literacy instruction, professional development and other support for current teachers in the classroom and guidance to help school leaders create supportive learning environments.

Illinois' plan will offer a flexible approach, aligning with state standards while allowing district-specific adaptations. It avoids prescribing specific materials or assessments, while instead promoting data-informed choices by districts.

“We have to shift literacy practices in Illinois,” State Superintendent Dr. Tony Sanders recently told the IASA Abe Lincoln Region. “Let me be clear. This is not a mandate that will force you to go out and buy a new curriculum.”

Literacy Growth in Joliet and Herrin

For Herrin CUSD #4, a low point turned out to be the catalyst for change the district needed. In the 2017–18 school year, the elementary school received the label of “Underperforming,” primarily due to the low performance of the subgroup of special education students.

Former superintendent Terry Ryker and his leadership team recognized the need to make numerous changes, including significant shifts in teaching and learning practices, staffing and curriculum.

The biggest shift early on was the decision to name eight instructional coaches in the 2018–2019 academic year, a move made possible, and supported by, the passage of Evidence-Based Funding.

The increased focus on teacher development and data analysis produced immediate results. Herrin Elementary School jumped from “Underperforming” to “Exemplary” in a year. But once the pandemic hit, it became clear the journey was far from over. Students returned to school with deficits in their reading ability.

“We knew we needed to catch them up, and we discovered the best way to do that was in focusing on the foundational skills,” said Tara Brandon, a reading specialist in Herrin CUSD #4. “We started dabbling in bringing more phonics from outside sources in combination with our reading curriculum to help support those learners that were underperforming.”

Herrin CUSD #4 elected to pilot its phonics-based instruction across second grade. Part of that process meant students had a 30-minute block every day focused on phonics. Like Joliet PSD #86, the signs are already encouraging.

On MAP Assessment data, achievement scores for second graders in Herrin Elementary School climbed to the 65th percentile in January 2024 from the 50th percentile in August 2023. As a result, the district plans to implement an increased focus on phonics across other grade levels.

“We have the right people in the right places, and we're affording them the time to work together,” said Nathaniel Wilson, superintendent of Herrin CUSD #4. “Those are the two big pieces from my level. Teachers are our greatest resources.”

Improving literacy in Joliet PSD #86 goes far beyond the implementation of a new literacy framework.

The district has invested significant resources in professional development, implemented numerous community engagement opportunities and created a culture of passion and excitement around literacy through contests and other events. That philosophy has even extended to birth. The district sends books and literacy information to local hospitals to give to the parents of every newborn baby.

“Our families recognized that we really made literacy first and foremost in our district,” said Dr. Anke Bradley, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction. “Every school in our district now has family reading nights. We're always looking for ways to promote literacy.”