Early and Targeted Literacy Support for Grades K-5: A Guide for Principals

All students, including students with disabilities, deserve access to a high-quality education tailored to their learning needs. Many students, however, struggle at some point in the general education classroom, particularly with literacy in kindergarten through fifth grade, and do not receive the support they need early enough. Early and targeted support is critical for student success within the classroom and beyond.

Principals play a crucial role in ensuring that students within their schools have access to the support they need to succeed. With this guide principals can identify and support students who are struggling in the general education classroom by:

- Understanding **key principles** of early and targeted support,

- Developing structures for **effective schoolwide support teams**, and

- Leading the **early and targeted support process**.

Key Principles of Early and Targeted Support for Literacy in Grades K-5

Students who struggle in the general education classroom need different support at different times. Early and targeted support is critical to ensuring success for students who struggle with literacy in grades K-5. Early and targeted support aims to ensure that schools deliver the right kind of support to the right students at the right time. In this guide, we define early and targeted support as:

1. **Early**: A systematic process is used to identify student needs as soon as they struggle to meet developmental literacy skills or grade-level reading standards.

2. **Targeted**: Needs are identified by assessing students' **foundational literacy, vocabulary and knowledge skills** against grade-level and developmental literacy goals.

3. **Support**: Evidence-based interventions, supports and/or services are aligned to the identified need(s) and adjusted over time to accelerate student progress.

✓ Early and Targeted Support is:	✗ Early and Targeted Support is not:
- A problem-solving process applicable to any student who struggles at any point, especially for students struggling with literacy in grades K-5	- Only applicable to young children - The same as **Child Find** (though it is a key component of an effective Child Find process)
- A schoolwide commitment to the learning of every child, involving the coordination of tools and resources to identify needs and deploy supports	- Accomplished by a single teacher without the tools and resources necessary to identify and support the diverse needs of every child in their classroom
- A proactive process deploying targeted supports at the earliest possible point in order to accelerate student progress	- A reactive process only deployed after a student fails an assessment
- Tightly aligned to core instruction and grade-level reading skills	- A separate program to put in front of kids (though a small number of students will need an additional **intensive intervention** program)
- A nimble process of identifying learning needs and responding quickly and with appropriate intensity	- A complicated process intended to **delay** identification of students with disabilities
- Based on student-specific needs as measured by individual performance on limited, intentional, ongoing assessments tied to grade-level standards	- Based on school-level averages and standardized interventions - A reason to overtest students

Developing Structures for Effective Schoolwide Support Teams

When teachers deliver the right instruction with the right intensity and duration to the right children at the right time, all children, including those with disabilities, can be successful. However, effective early and targeted support requires not only effective educators, but a schoolwide support team that collaborates to support struggling students. This section describes key actions that principals must take to develop the schoolwide structures that ensure that all students receive the support that they need as early as possible.

> Think of the schoolwide support team as an early warning system for student literacy needs. In the same way that the National Hurricane Center is intently focused on detecting hurricanes as early as possible and mobilizing key resources so that they are in place before the hurricane strikes, so too must a schoolwide support team be intently focused on identifying learning needs to mobilize and deploy key resources across the school.

Start from a Baseline of High-Quality Curriculum and Instruction

The primary condition for successful early and targeted support is to ensure all students are receiving daily high-quality instruction on grade-level curriculum grounded in the science of reading development: foundational literacy skills, vocabulary, and content knowledge. To develop a schoolwide commitment to this baseline, principals should:

- Ensure schoolwide use of high-quality, standards-aligned, grade-level curriculum and aligned assessments in every classroom.

- Train teachers and members of the schoolwide support team to implement the curriculum and aligned supports, ensuring that all school staff involved in early and targeted support have a strong foundational understanding of high-quality curriculum and instruction.

Gather the Right People

An effective schoolwide support team includes experts across key disciplines who collaborate frequently to monitor student learning outcomes and to ensure that struggling students receive the support and interventions they need to succeed. Principals should take the steps below to build effective teams:

- Identify schoolwide experts to form the team, including a teacher from each grade level, a building administrator, key specialists (e.g. literacy coach/specialist, special education teacher, speech therapist, counselor, English language teacher), and pupil appraisal staff.

- Provide team members with the tools that they need to support classroom teachers including access to, and professional learning on, the ELA curriculum.

- Provide team members with access to key student data: attendance, discipline and building-level assessment data.

> *The schoolwide support team is not charged with exactly the same work as a special education evaluation team; however, it should include key members of the pupil appraisal team such as a speech therapist and a school psychologist. This overlap complements the work of the schoolwide support team and ensures schoolwide alignment and continuity between early and targeted support and special education services.*

Protect Time for Collaboration

Schoolwide support teams must have frequent and focused time together to collectively analyze data, identify learning needs and develop supports. The principal can protect this collaborative time by taking the following steps:

- Create a master schedule that allows time for the team to meet at least weekly.

- Establish expectations for regular collaboration between classroom teachers and the schoolwide support team. For example, define how teachers can and should share classroom assessment data (e.g. curriculum-based assessments, observational data) with the team, or when to seek input from the team to inform small-group instruction.

- Create structures for key team members to collaborate with classroom teachers to support effective instruction. For example, identify opportunities for literacy coaches and/or speech therapists to observe and provide feedback on whole-group and small-group instruction.

- Create structures to ensure team meetings continue across school closure scenarios, including in-person, virtual, and hybrid. For example, set up protocols to continue to collect and review attendance data when instruction quickly pivots from in-person to virtual learning. Add outreach protocols if student attendance patterns change.

Ensure Access to Reliable Data

In order to accurately identify when and why a student is struggling with learning to read, schoolwide support teams must analyze multiple sources of student-specific data including attendance, discipline, and classroom- and student-level assessment results. These data must come from high-quality measures including universal literacy screeners* and curriculum-aligned assessments. To prepare the team for effective data use, principals should do the following:

- Conduct an **assessment audit** to evaluate current data sources and ensure student data are measured using a limited number of high-quality tools. Specifically,

  » Select a **valid and reliable universal literacy screener** to identify students at-risk in one or more foundational reading skills; and

  » Use high-quality, curriculum-aligned **assessments** to monitor ongoing progress toward key literacy goals.

- Provide professional development for teachers and support staff on how to administer and interpret assessments.

- Communicate with parents in clear and simple language about assessments at key points, including information about what assessments are used, why they are used, and students results.

> **How teams use this data is critical, but access to data from the right assessments is a key precondition for teams to use data to improve literacy outcomes. Consider the early warning system: meteorologists rely on multiple sources of data, including forecasting tools and complex modeling in order to accurately predict when and where a hurricane might strike and with what intensity.**

> **Effective universal screeners are brief, easy to administer, and aligned to key grade-level and developmental literacy skills. They are important as predictive tools to identify students who are at risk; they should be administered when students enter kindergarten, if not earlier, and repeated three times per year until students are reading fluently.*

Early and Targeted Support Problem-Solving Process

Early and targeted support is a recursive problem-solving process that requires strategic schoolwide coordination to support the success of struggling students. After establishing foundational schoolwide structures, principals should lead the schoolwide support team in this process throughout the school year by taking the following steps.

Define the Problem Solving Process

The work of a schoolwide support team must be guided by a clearly defined, recursive problem-solving process whose goal is to increase student success by deploying targeted supports as early as possible. To create an efficient and effective process, principals should:

- Create agendas for weekly and quarterly meetings to ensure that the team is focused on the right work:

Weekly Action Meetings	Quarterly Step Backs
• The team is focused on **immediate actions** to support students over the next week including reviewing key data, identifying specific student needs, creating a plan of support, and coordinating resources.	• The team is focused on identifying schoolwide and classroom **trends** to identify professional learning needs of teachers and/or identify gaps in resources needed to support high-quality classroom instruction.

- Develop step-by-step protocols to guide review of assessments, and to develop and monitor targeted support plans.

- Provide updates at key intervals to stakeholders regarding the work of the team.

Use Data To Identify Student Needs

Schoolwide support teams must strategically use the results of reliable student data--attendance, discipline and academic assessments--to identify student-specific learning needs. This analysis is a critical step before designing and deploying early and targeted supports. To support this process, the principal should:

- Provide templates or reports for the team to better visualize the results of assessments at a building, classroom and student level.

- Ensure that all members of the student support team have access to the data.

- Establish routines for classroom teachers to share ongoing results of curriculum-based assessments with the team.

- Develop clear protocols and/or **processes** for members of the team to review, analyze, and act on student data.

- Adjust classroom-based groups and supports regularly based on needs identified in the data.

> *In order to ensure that students who need the most intensive supports receive them, use the results of universal screeners to guide benchmarks. For example, if a high percentage of students are identified as at risk for reading failure, the first step cannot be to place all of them into small intensive support groups, as school resources will be overstretched. Consider instead more effective and explicit classroom instruction and determine what portion of the most at-risk students will receive more intensive support.*

Support Effective Delivery of Targeted Supports and Intensive Interventions

The principal should ensure all educators in the building know the difference between targeted supports and intensive interventions, and design schoolwide structures and staffing to ensure effective delivery of both. Early and targeted supports are most effective when they are provided by the staff in the school building with the most expertise and relevant skills to support specific student needs.

Early and Targeted Supports	
Integrated Supports: **Enhances Access to the ELA Curriculum**	**Intensive Intervention:** **Offered in Addition to the ELA Curriculum**
✓ For all students in all grades. Assumes all students are diverse learners with additional needs. ✓ Designed as part of the ELA curriculum. ✓ Uses data to design scaffolds and supports to ensure all students can engage in learning. ✓ Integrates additional whole-class practice in foundational skills when appropriate. ✓ Creates flexible groups based on student needs (e.g. decoding, fluency), rather than overall reading ability. ✓ Integrates accommodations, academic and behavioral supports from students' individualized education programs (IEPs).	✓ Typically for a very small number of students in grades 3+. ✓ A research-based structured reading program for persistently struggling students using systematic and explicit instruction to teach phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency. ✓ Appropriate for students who continue to struggle to learn how to read after receiving all possible integrated supports available during whole-class and small-group instruction. ✓ Includes a diagnostic that identifies needs and recommends individualized instruction. ✓ Is delivered in addition to the ELA curriculum.

How Principals Support Intensive Interventions with Schoolwide Structures

✓ Purchase intensive intervention program(s) that **address the specific foundational reading skill need(s)**. Not all programs address all skills equally well.
 	
  » The Louisiana Department of Education rates foundations of reading intensive intervention materials for grades 3+ as Tier 1 (highest quality) to Tier 3 (lower quality).
 	
✓ Create a master schedule that provides time for all students to get the support that they need **without missing out on essentials** such as art, music and physical education.
 	
  » Some schools will create a schedule that includes 20-30 minutes of flexible time each day. During this time, students should be scheduled based on their current academic needs: some students may need intensive intervention, while others may benefit from extending their current learning.
 	
✓ Structure staffing to ensure that the **most skilled personnel** are available to provide the most intensive supports. This will require creative scheduling of all adults in the building, such as paraprofessionals and other support staff, to ensure that all students are effectively engaged in learning.
 	
  » Some schools use paraprofessionals trained in the reading curriculum to provide extension of learning for a larger group of students who do not require intensive interventions while a highly skilled reading teacher provides a foundations of reading intensive intervention program to a small group of students.

Continuous Documentation and Monitoring

Schoolwide support teams must have efficient processes for documenting data and intervention plans over time in order to measure student progress and make evidence-based decisions. Principals can lead an effective multi-year documentation and monitoring process when they:

- Ensure student information and data are captured and regularly updated so that schoolwide support team members and other school staff can access student information across years.

- Adjust supports over time, based on data: adjustments may include continuing, discontinuing, or intensifying integrated supports or intensive interventions.

- Develop requirements and regular checks for sharing assessment and intervention data with families as students progress over time.

What happens when you suspect a child has a disability? What is the role of the schoolwide support team?

Whenever a child is suspected to have a disability, s/he should be referred for a special education evaluation. This process should not, however, be disconnected from the work of the schoolwide support team, nor should it result in canceling other supports already in place for the child. The goal of the support team is to connect every student to the right instruction with the right intensity at the right time, up to and including special education services. Early and targeted supports can continue to be used as key components to accelerate learning based on specific student needs; special education services should complement rather than replace these other supports.

*If you suspect a child has a disability, you should continue the problem-solving recommendations of the schoolwide support team **and** refer the student for special education evaluation. Specifically, you should:*

- *Develop structures for collaboration between members of the IEP team and the schoolwide support team, including regular data-sharing and progress reviews.*

- *Support continued monitoring of the student's progress and adjust services and supports in collaboration with the IEP team, and/or flag key data to the IEP team to consider as they adjust services and supports.*