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Kentucky Read to Succeed Evaluation: Year 2 Report Executive Summary

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Prior to the onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, 50% of Kentucky's third-graders did not score at or above proficiency in reading (Kentucky Department of Education [KDE], 2019) and Kentucky's fourth-graders were declining in their reading results (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). However, well established research has shown that investing in early literacy through teacher professional development and through classroom curriculum with strong literacy content, such as phonemic awareness and systematic phonics instruction, improves student literacy achievement (e.g., Didion et al., 2019; National Reading Panel, 2000; Piasta et al., 2009). In response to these statewide trends, the Kentucky General Assembly passed the Read to Succeed Act (Senate Bill 9, 2022), which supports evidence-based early literacy instruction rooted in the science of reading and invests in teachers through reading academies and targeted coaching to increase student success in reading.

The Kentucky Reading Academies program, implemented through the Read to Succeed Act, intends to transform literacy instruction across the state by expanding access to Lexia Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS®) Professional Learning. Evaluations of the impact of participating in LETRS have found significant increases in teachers' knowledge of early literacy skills as well as increases in the quality of literacy instruction, student engagement, and teaching competencies (Folsom et al., 2017). Alongside these educator outcomes, evaluations of LETRS have also found increases in students' grade-level proficiency in Grades K–3 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction , 2023) and increases in students' Grade 3 reading proficiency (Mississippi Department of Education, 2024). Educators and administrators across the state are able to opt in to this no-cost professional learning opportunity and enroll in LETRS for Educators (a 2-year program) or LETRS for Administrators (a 1-year program).

The Kentucky Reading Academies program is being implemented in phases targeting four cohorts of educators and administrators with Cohort 1 beginning in fall 2022 and Cohort 4 launching in 2025. The goal of the Kentucky Reading Academies is to influence K–5 educators' knowledge, beliefs, and classroom instructional practices in early literacy so as to ultimately improve student reading and writing outcomes. In particular, the program has five literacy goals for educator and student learning:

- Increased teacher knowledge regarding how students learn to read and why some students struggle.
- Increased teacher capacity to incorporate instructional strategies aligned to their new learning regarding how students learn to read and why some students struggle.
- Increased adoption of high-quality instructional resources for reading and writing at Tier 1 with aligned resources at Tiers 2–3.
- Increased student progress toward grade-level proficiency based on universal screeners and diagnostic assessments.
- Increased student outcomes at Grade 3 on the Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA) for reading.

In 2023, the Kentucky General Assembly further required that all school districts adopt a comprehensive reading program by the beginning of the 2024–2025 academic year. Districts were able to select from a list of green-rated high-quality instructional resources (HQIRs) for their Tier 1 instruction as well as a variety of highly rated supplemental materials. In addition, select teachers also began participating in literacy coaching with State Literacy Coaching Specialists (SLCSs) during the 2024–2025 academic year.

In 2023, the KDE hired ICF, a third-party evaluator, to address four primary research questions that together seek to help the KDE and other stakeholders understand the extent and ways in which participation in the Kentucky Reading Academies is shaping educator practice and student learning. The third research question was thoroughly addressed in Year 1 and is not included in this report. For the final year of this evaluation, ICF continued to explore the remaining three research questions and added two additional exploratory research questions, depicted in the sidebar.

Evaluation Research Questions

1. To what extent and in what ways does participation in the Kentucky Reading Academies influence educator knowledge, beliefs, and classroom instruction?
2. To what extent are the Kentucky Reading Academies' five literacy goals for educator and student learning met?
3. To what extent does each element of the LETRS program positively influence educator knowledge, beliefs, and classroom instruction? How? *(Addressed in Year 1 report only.)*
4. When the literacy coaching model is established, to what extent are the school-based coaches effective in supporting and achieving positive literacy outcomes?

EQ1. What organizational/community contextual factors affect participation in the reading academies and implementation of evidence-based instructional strategies? To what extent does district support/buy-in influence positive literacy outcomes for teachers and students?

EQ2. To what extent does cohort participation impact literacy skills and beliefs?

This evaluation utilized a mixed-methods approach that included quantitative metrics collected through teacher surveys and the KSA along with qualitative data collected through school-based observations and focus groups with instructional staff and school leaders. Quantitative data was analyzed descriptively, including through subgroup analysis, and inferentially, using hierarchical linear modeling. Qualitative data were transcribed and coded using an inductive approach. Findings from across data sources were triangulated based on topic area and evaluation question.

Key Findings

In examining trends by research questions, participants benefitted from new and increased knowledge, implemented new or modified literacy strategies into their classroom practice including through the use of HQIRs and with the support of SLCSs, and saw promising indicators of student growth as a result. Each of these trends is discussed further, as aligned with relevant research questions.

Research Question 1: To what extent and in what ways does participation in the Kentucky Reading Academies influence educator knowledge, beliefs, and classroom instruction?

Overall participation: Participation in the Kentucky Reading Academies varied widely across districts and schools, with individual participation influenced by both intrinsic motivation (personal commitment to literacy improvement) and extrinsic factors (administrative encouragement or incentives). Those who participated in the reading academies with colleagues in their building reported feeling more supported and more deeply engaged in their participation while those participating by themselves felt isolation and expressed a desire for more widespread participation. Across all cohorts of the reading academies, LETRS continued to receive praise as one of the most impactful professional development experiences educators had received. LETRS participation was reported to deepen educators' understanding of literacy concepts and terminology—even for experienced teachers—and empowered them to better explain reading strategies to students.

Educator knowledge: Cohorts who were further along in their LETRS coursework consistently and significantly outperformed teachers in their literacy knowledge compared with those who had not yet progressed as far in the program, suggesting a positive relationship between LETRS exposure and literacy knowledge. Educators also reported that LETRS improved their knowledge of how to use targeted assessments to identify student needs more precisely and how to apply evidence-based strategies in their classroom instruction.

> *"Several of my students—they don't hear the sound; they don't hear the blends … . The LETRS training has been great for training me how to teach them and then implementing that … so far this year, I feel like I'm seeing a lot of success."*
>
> – Special education teacher, Cohort 1

Educator beliefs: Educators across all cohorts reported greater alignment with beliefs about the phonics approach than beliefs about the whole-word or meaning-based approach to early literacy at each data collection point. These beliefs did not significantly differ by cohort or change significantly as participants advanced through LETRS.

***Classroom instruction*:** Implementation of structured literacy into classroom instruction was a key focus of this second year of evaluation, which led to a focus on Cohort 1 educators who had completed their professional learning and were able to implement strategies from across the LETRS program into their instruction. Overall, LETRS professional learning was widely seen as impactful in transforming literacy instruction, particularly when paired with an aligned HQIR and supported by an SLCS (discussed further in Research Questions 2 and 3). Cohort 1 educators reported implementing a wide range of strategies in their classrooms, including word mapping, vocabulary activities, story frameworks, and phonics instruction.

For students requiring additional support, educators, particularly special education teachers and reading interventionists, reported using LETRS resources to guide Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction. Teachers and interventionists regularly administered LETRS screeners and assessments (ranging from weekly to quarterly) to facilitate more precise, data-driven interventions to address specific literacy weaknesses or gaps in understanding. Special education teachers reported that LETRS

strategies were highly applicable across various instructional settings. They used techniques related to phonics, phonemic awareness, decoding, and morphology, often in collaboration with general education teachers who had also completed LETRS. This shared training allowed for more cohesive co-teaching and flexible student grouping.

Research Question 2: To what extent are the Kentucky Reading Academies' five literacy goals for educator and student learning met?

Goal A: Increased teacher knowledge regarding how students learn to read and why some students struggle.

As discussed under Research Question 1, educators across all cohorts reported increased knowledge about student literacy, with analysis demonstrating that this knowledge increases during the 2 years of participation in the Kentucky Reading Academies. Specific knowledge gains reported by educators related to technical knowledge, such as how the brain processes written language, morphology, and the role of spelling in reading, as well as practical skills including segmenting sounds and how to teach phonics and phonemic awareness across multiple grade levels.

Goal B. Increased teacher capacity to incorporate instructional strategies aligned to their new learning regarding how students learn to read and why some students struggle.

As discussed under Research Question 1, participation in and completion of the reading academies was credited with transforming literacy instruction by educators across cohorts. Educators across cohorts reported that implementing instructional strategies learned through LETRS was challenging while participation in the reading academies was ongoing. This was largely attributed to the significant time commitment required by LETRS that limited the amount of time available to make ad hoc adjustments to classroom instruction. Survey data showed that most teachers across all cohorts were using LETRS strategies regularly, but Cohort 1 teachers—who had the most exposure—were significantly more likely to report ease in selecting and applying those strategies. This suggests that greater program exposure and time for practice contribute to increased confidence and capacity for successful implementation of instructional strategies. Indeed, Cohort 1 teachers reported that applying LETRS principles became easier after completing the full training, especially with time to reflect and plan over the summer. Cohort 2 teachers also reported greater confidence in using resources provided by LETRS, such as progress monitoring tools, compared to Cohort 3 participants, suggesting that teacher capacity to use these tools increases over time. Reading interventionists and special educators also generally felt an increased capacity to implement LETRS, especially when their schools provided aligned instructional resources.

> *"I felt that it's easier to implement the strategies that I've learned now that I'm finished with LETRS."*
> – Grade 3 teacher, Cohort 1

Goal C. Increased adoption of high-quality instructional resources (HQIRs) for reading and writing at Tier 1 with aligned resources at Tiers 2–3.

By the 2024–2025 school year, a majority of school districts had adopted an HQIR for literacy, with 87% of surveyed educators indicating their district had selected a core HQIR from a list of approved, green-rated programs by spring 2025. Most of the selected core HQIRs included

supports for Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction, and over half also reported using supplemental resources.

However, HQIRs were being implemented at very high rates, with more than 80% of educators working in districts that had adopted an HQIR also reporting implementation of that HQIR. While some educators felt their HQIR aligned well with LETRS and structured literacy, others noted only partial alignment or cited other challenges with HQIR implementation including frequent curriculum changes or the use of multiple programs simultaneously. SLCSs were able to mitigate many of these challenges both with individual teachers and across whole buildings, which is discussed further in Research Question 4.

Goal D. Increased student progress toward grade-level proficiency based on universal screeners and diagnostic assessments.

During this second year of the evaluation, teachers and administrators continued to report increased use of universal screeners and diagnostic assessments to measure student growth and identify areas where students needed extra support. These participants shared examples of using these assessments individually and across classrooms or grade levels to provide more tailored instruction, particularly to struggling students.

Through these assessments and other markers of student progress, teachers and SLCSs reported substantial improvements in students' foundational literacy skills after implementing LETRS strategies. Educators shared numerous examples of growth in areas such as spelling, decoding, and phonemic awareness as well as attitudinal improvements such as confidence and independence in reading. Coaches and administrators also reported noticable student gains in reading fluency, vocabulary, and engagement with complex texts.

> *"For the end-of-the-year [assessment], my kindergarten teacher has 95% of her kindergarteners on grade level. Yes. So that was super, super exciting."*
> – State Literacy Coaching Specialist

Special education teachers and reading interventionists also highlighted their use of diagnositic assessments to track student progress and reported marked progress among students receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 services, including those with significant cognitive disabilities or speech delays. Teachers across roles shared powerful stories of transformation, including non-readers reaching grade level, students with ADHD thriving through hands-on learning, and noticeable improvements in writing due to more explicit modeling. These outcomes underscore the broad and meaningful impact of LETRS on individual student literacy development.

> *"This is my tenth year teaching and I've always taught second grade and I've never seen writing like I've seen the last 2 years, because the programs have us doing so much more explicit modeling and this is what a sentence is and this makes a sentence."*
> – Second grade teacher, Cohort 1

Goal E. Increased student outcomes at Grade 3 on the KSA for Reading.

This Year 2 evaluation began to demonstrate positive, statistically significant growth among students who were taught by LETRS-trained teachers. KSA Reading assessment data, taken during the prior school year (2023–2024) found that Grade 5 students who had

LETRS-trained teachers in two consecutive years scored significantly higher than students who only had a single LETRS-trained teacher or those who did not have any LETRS-trained teachers. This trend also persisted among students receiving special education services, with students in Grade 4 and Grade 5 who had two consecutive years of LETRS-trained teachers outperforming their counterparts who had only one or no LETRS-trained teachers across those two years. This data lags behind the rest of this evaluation, which focused on the 2024–2025 academic year, and has significant findings only in the upper grades.

Research Question 4: To what extent are the school-based literacy coaches effective in supporting and achieving positive literacy outcomes?

SLCSs were in place in 23 schools across Kentucky, supporting 148 individual teachers as well as the broader community of educators in each building. A subset of 100 of these coached educators were included in an observation database, where 58 were participants of the LETRS for Educators professional learning and 42 were not participants in LETRS. Coaches engaged with teachers in a five-phase coaching cycle (Goal Setting and Planning, Learning Supports, Feedback and Practice, Mid-cycle Check-in, Final Feedback and Practice) that prioritized multiple rounds of feedback and practice. In addition, coaches observed and rated teachers on instructional practice related to foundation skills, and comprehension in reading and writing. Overall, teachers and their supporting administrators placed a high value on the SLCSs and reported that coaches were particularly critical in their support for HQIR implementation and their modeling of and direction in structured literacy implementation in the classroom.

Teachers described coaches as approachable, knowledgeable, and instrumental in breaking down dense content during professional learning communities (PLCs), ultimately enhancing their ability to deliver strong literacy instruction. Focus group participants especially valued modeling, co-teaching, and collaborative planning, which helped them internalize best practices and build trust with their coaches. Surveyed teachers, regardless of LETRS participation, reported strong agreement that coaching improved their instructional strategies and helped them implement next steps to enhance student learning. However, administrators reported that coaches were especially valuable in schools with limited LETRS participation, where many teachers lacked foundational knowledge of structured literacy.

Coaches' primary role was to support teachers in their implementation of structured literacy strategies, which benefited all participating teachers, with LETRS participants receiving more of an initial benefit from coaching. Initially, teachers with LETRS training reported greater confidence in their foundational literacy knowledge and instructional flexibility, particularly when responding to student needs. They felt more prepared to explain their instructional decisions and adapt their teaching, while non-LETRS teachers initially struggled with shifting from older practices to evidence-based methods. However, coaching helped bridge this gap, with even teachers who were initially resistant gaining a better understanding of foundational literacy through support from literacy coaches.

Observation data showed that LETRS-trained teachers outperformed their non-LETRS peers in foundational literacy instruction during midyear evaluations, particularly in phonemic awareness, phonics, instructional practices, and student engagement. However, by the end of the year, differences between the two groups leveled out. In comprehension-focused lessons, both groups

performed similarly across all timepoints in areas such as using high-quality texts and effective questioning. LETRS-trained teachers did show a midyear advantage in fostering student engagement, but again, this difference diminished by year's end. These findings suggest that while LETRS provides an initial boost in instructional quality, sustained coaching plays a key role in supporting all teachers' growth over time.

In addition to the documented increases in educator knowledge, findings from teachers and coaches highlight significant shifts in classroom practice that were reported to yield measurable student benefits. Educators reported regular implementation of evidence-based strategies, such as orthographic mapping, sound walls, explicit writing models, and systematic phonics instruction, which enhanced both core instruction and targeted interventions. SLCSs observed that teachers demonstrated increased confidence and instructional precision, reporting that even initially reluctant educators incorporated structured literacy practices when provided with modeling and feedback. These changes in instruction corresponded with reports of notable student growth, including descriptions of some kindergarten classrooms achieving near-universal grade-level proficiency; special education students demonstrating new decoding skills; and broader improvements in fluency, spelling, and independent writing across older grades.

The integration of coaching support, particularly alongside LETRS, was regarded as a critical factor in ensuring the fidelity of implementation and the effective use of HQIRs. Teachers cited the individualized support, goal setting related to HQIRs, ongoing opportunities for reflection, and practical tools—such as lesson modeling and student work analysis protocols—as building their confidence and instructional effectiveness. Administrators also reported that coaches supported building-wide implementation of their HQIR, helping educators manage the complexity of new materials introduced alongside other curricula during PLCs. By the year's end, coaches' ratings of HQIR implementation integrity had significantly improved among coached teachers, regardless of whether or not the coached teachers had also participated in LETRS, highlighting the central role coaches played in successful HQIR adoption.

> *"[My coach and I] would go to classrooms and walk through together. And … we'd come out and we'd debrief … . She would teach me. So then when I would give feedback to the teacher, I could be very specific. … Without her, we would have all been way off track even with the right resource."*
> – School administrator

Exploratory Research Question 1: What organizational/community contextual factors affect participation in the reading academies and implementation of evidence-based instructional strategies? To what extent does district support/buy-in influence positive literacy outcomes for teachers and students?

The biggest contextual factor supporting participation in the reading academies was administrative or district support for participation. Participants referenced a variety of support mechanisms including covering the costs of substitutes, providing teacher stipends as participation incentives, and allowing time for teachers to collaborate and discuss LETRS learnings with their peers. Group participation in the reading academies was also reported to support individual involvement and completion while educators who were the only LETRS participants in their buildings often felt isolated and struggled to align their practices with peers.

Another key contextual factor influencing implementation of evidence-based instructional strategies was in-building collaboration, which was credited with fostering shared learning, motivation, and alignment across classrooms. Teachers who participated in LETRS alongside colleagues reported feeling more supported and confident, especially when they could engage in regular PLCs or grade-level meetings that tied LETRS strategies to their HQIR curricula.

SLCSs were in place in 23 schools across Kentucky. This contextual factor further enhanced implementation by offering personalized guidance, modeling lessons, and reinforcing LETRS-aligned practices, especially when both coaches and administrators were trained in LETRS. This benefit also extended to the entire building when SLCSs shared guidance on HQIR implementation and structured literacy instructional practices with administrators or at PLCs.

A broader culture of continuous learning also emerged as a critical factor supporting classroom instruction. Schools that emphasized professional growth, maintained a growth mindset, and prioritized doing what's best for students created environments where LETRS strategies could thrive. Regular PLCs, both within and across schools, provided structured time for collaboration, resource sharing, and instructional planning. These meetings often included data reviews using web-based integration platforms, allowing educators to reflect on student progress and adjust instruction accordingly.

This administrative and district support also played a key role in supporting positive literacy outcomes for students—when principals and district leaders were LETRS-trained, teachers felt more understood and better supported. Teachers cited regular PLCs, led by supportive administrators or teacher leaders, that leveraged LETRS tools and resources as well as data from screeners and assessments to tailor student instruction. This data-driven, collaborative approach helped ensure fidelity to evidence-based practices and supported sustained implementation of LETRS strategies. Ongoing support for administrators, provided by SLCSs or district staff, also contributed to successful implementation of structured literacy. Administrators who worked with a coach felt like they were better able to identify evidence-based literacy instruction in the classroom because of support from the literacy coach. Overall, participation and implementation were most successful in schools with strong leadership that was committed to structured literacy, collaborative structures, and a shared commitment to literacy improvement across grade- or school-levels.

Exploratory Research Question 2: To what extent does cohort participation impact literacy skills and beliefs?

The Kentucky Reading Academies has enrolled three cohorts of participants into the LETRS for Educators professional learning program. This evaluation sought to explore the possibility that the cumulative influence of literacy initiatives throughout Kentucky may have caused a shift in school cultures related to literacy that shaped the understanding of Cohort 3 participants in ways that were not true for earlier cohorts.

In terms of beliefs and perceptions, all cohorts expressed high satisfaction with LETRS and acknowledged its positive impact on their instructional practice. However, LETRS exposure rather than cohort participation seemed to have the largest influence on teachers' ability to implement structured literacy strategies into classroom instruction. Cohort 1 teachers, who had the longest

exposure to LETRS, reported greater ease in implementing LETRS strategies and demonstrated higher confidence and comfort in applying evidence-based practices. Similarly, Cohort 2 teachers reported significantly stronger agreement that LETRS equipped them with the skills to use progress monitoring tools effectively, compared to Cohort 3. This indicates that while all cohorts benefited from the training, those further along in the program (like Cohorts 1 and 2) experienced greater gains in both practical application and belief in the program's value. Overall, cohort participation influenced educators' literacy implementation, but the depth of impact was closely tied to the duration of LETRS exposure rather than other external factors.

Conclusions

Throughout this evaluation, more than 1,700 participants (including LETRS participants, coaches, and administrators) shared their feedback and experiences through focus groups, surveys, and case studies. Across these experiences, as well as the Year 1 evaluation conducted previously, numerous common themes emerged across our data, lending confidence to these findings. Participants continued to participate in and complete their LETRS coursework, benefitting from enhanced knowledge about structured literacy and struggling readers. Kentucky Reading Academies participants, as well as educators across Kentucky, implemented structured literacy in their classroom practice with the support of HQIRs and a limited number of SLCSs, and saw indicators of positive student outcomes as a result.

Educators across all cohorts of LETRS reported increased knowledge about student literacy with knowledge increasing across the 2 years of participating in the Kentucky Reading Academies, suggesting that increased exposure to LETRS professional learning may be significantly related to greater literacy knowledge. LETRS participants, particularly those in Cohort 1 who had completed the full professional learning program, reported implementing a variety of LETRS strategies and materials in their classroom practice. Many teachers reported that these paired well with HQIRs, particularly when HQIR implementation was supported by an SLCS. Teachers and interventionists reported regularly administering LETRS screeners and assessments to identify skill gaps and tailor instruction accordingly.

This Year 2 evaluation began to demonstrate positive, statistically significant growth among students who were taught by LETRS-trained teachers in 2023–2024, particularly Grade 5 students who had LETRS-trained teachers across two consecutive academic years as well as Grades 4 and 5 special education students who had the same. Qualitative findings from this evaluation found that teachers frequently reported difficulty fully implementing LETRS strategies into their classroom instruction until they had completed the 2-year professional learning. This timeline means that the 2024–2025 school year is the first with LETRS graduates from Cohort 1, which suggests that most teachers did not start fully implementing LETRS approaches and strategies into their classroom until that school year. This, alongside the more widespread implementation of HQIRs and the targeted deployment of SLCSs, suggests that student literacy growth will continue to progress in subsequent years, as more students have the opportunity to be exposed to multiple years of LETRS-trained teachers as well as curriculum that is aligned with structured literacy.

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