

**Improving Reading Performance:
What Northern New England Can Learn from Mississippi**

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Executive Summary

In 2000, education leaders in Mississippi put the results of the National Reading Panel's landmark study into practice and trained thousands of teachers and principals in the science of reading. Students' reading skills steadily increased, from a 2002 score of 203, at the bottom of the country, to exceeding the national average with a score of 217 in 2022. This progress paved the way for the Mississippi Governor and Legislature to advance laws compelling all public schools to follow suit. While this extraordinary progress has received widespread recognition, the purpose of this study was to highlight the voices of Mississippi public-school educators and render a fuller picture of everyday school practices for the benefit of those in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. This research began with a review of the literature and relevant state laws, followed by a four-day visit that included: (1) interviewing teachers, coaches, principals, and district administrators; (2) conducting observations in 16 classrooms, from four-year-olds in Pre-K to seniors in Advanced Placement English; and (3) leading focus-group interviews with a 6th-grade teacher team and approximately 25 educational leaders from across the Jackson School District. Lastly, I interviewed the chief executive officer of the Barksdale Reading Institute.

Ten findings emerged from this study:

1. Students are ready to participate in evidence-based instruction.
2. School and classroom procedures reflect high learning expectations.
3. The school day and year address students' learning needs.
4. Highly-motivated educators fully focus on literacy instruction.
5. Principals and teachers fully embrace coaching.
6. Frequent assessment, data analysis, and reporting inform teachers' instruction and motivate students to perform their best.
7. Pre-K builds the foundation as the model of educational excellence.

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Nearly all students qualifying for special education spend 80% of their day taught by their general-education teachers.

9. Every Pre–K-1 classroom includes a full-time instructional assistant.

10. An evidence-based curriculum supports teachers as they learn the foundations of English and the science of reading.

The author concluded that changes in literacy curriculum, instruction, and assessment united with existing Mississippi practices. Not once did educators mention poverty, high student mobility, family difficulties, or other socioeconomic disadvantages as barriers to literacy. Grades K-2 are crucial years for preparing the groundwork of alphabets, phonemic awareness, and phonics. When this foundation has been poorly laid, students require years of intervention to undo the mislearning and become proficient readers. Even when classroom teachers lacked knowledge in specific aspects of the foundations of English, students benefited from the activities and repeated practice available in the High Quality Instructional Materials adopted by the district. In Mississippi, the researcher found educators who believed all students could and should learn to read and that this responsibility was theirs, because their students' futures and freedoms depended on learning to read well.

