

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

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*But in the land of big dreams and bigger lies, we love greatness anyway. And if we want it, if we aren't afraid to grab it, we have to look South, to America.*

- Imani Perry, *South to America*

*Education leads to liberation.*

- Nikole Hannah-Jones

**Introduction**

For at least five decades, researchers across the world have published thousands of studies that form the body of knowledge called the [science of reading](#). In 2000, the [National Reading Panel](#) (NRP) conducted a rigorous analysis of this research and received testimony from 125 stakeholders, distilling five components necessary for reading well: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. This became the basis of developing new curricula, instructional methods, and assessment tools, and ultimately shaped the 2010 [Common Core State Standards](#) for Pre–K-12 English Language Arts.

Until the NRP's report, phonemic awareness and phonics had typically received less attention in classroom instruction than the other three areas, under the assumption that these seemingly natural processes happened intuitively in children. For most people, this is not the case. Reading acquisition requires direct instruction to “crack the code”: reading each letter and letter combination (graphemes such as *ph*, *ough*, and *tious*) and mapping these patterns to the brain. This neurological process leads to expanding sight word recognition, building vocabulary, recognizing syntax, and reaching the goal of text comprehension. In addition, students need to learn phonological awareness, as explained by [Birsch and Carreker](#), a “sensitivity to the sound structure in spoken language.” Two common representations of reading acquisition are Gough and Tumner's [Simple View of Reading](#) and Scarborough's [Reading Rope](#), both of which illustrate the NRP findings in detail.

Figure 1. Gough &amp; Tunmer's Simple View of Reading (1986)

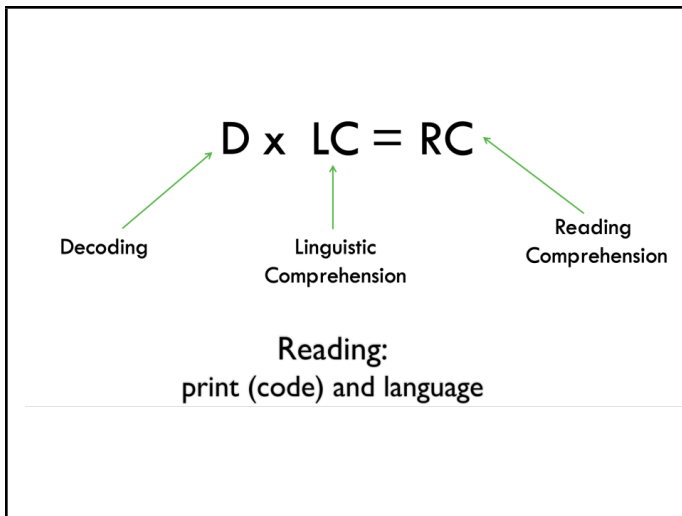
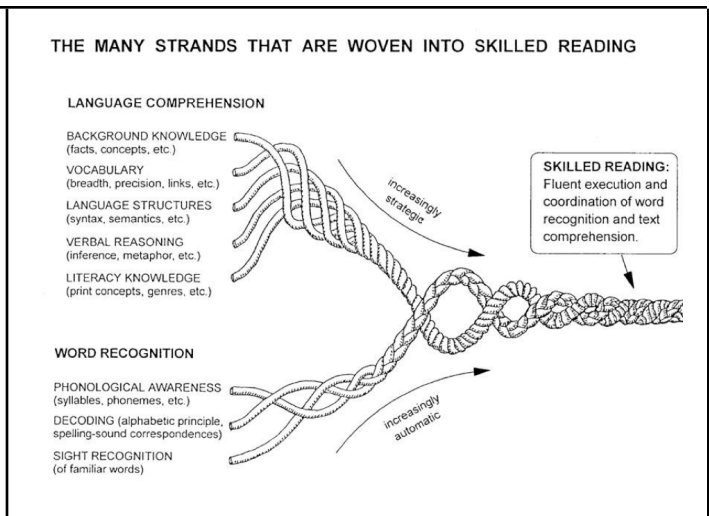


Figure 2. Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001)



In Mississippi, efforts to implement the NRP's recommendations for instruction began the year of its publication, when business leader and philanthropist Jim Barksdale donated \$100 million to found the [Barksdale Reading Institute](#). Barksdale created a research and development group; hired approximately 30 instructional coaches; and provided professional development for K-3 teachers and principals in about 180 schools. According to Kelly Butler, Chief Executive Officer of the Barksdale Reading Institute, when the Mississippi Legislature adopted the [Literacy-based Promotion Act](#) (LBPA) into law, much of the groundwork had been laid across the state. Following its passage, the Mississippi State Department of Education hired literacy coaches and offered [Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling](#) (LETRS), a highly-respected program for training educators to teach reading.

### Research Methods

When I began studying the science of reading in 2019 (eventually completing my third graduate degree in education in 2022), the "Mississippi Miracle" frequently arose as *the* national model for improving student reading performance. Presenting at the [2022 National Summit on Education: Solving America's Literacy Crisis with the Science of Reading](#), Dr. Kymyona Burk shared her state's compelling journey from her vantage point as the State Literacy Director. With her support, I quickly identified educational leaders to interview and schools to visit. The Board of Directors of the [International Dyslexia Association - Northern New England Alliance](#) (on which I serve) approved my proposal for a Mississippi visit to gather qualitative data and highlight the voices that the numbers could not show. In preparation, I reviewed relevant state

laws, MS Department of Education press releases, news reports, and peer-reviewed journal articles. Over three days, I visited 6 schools in the cities of Jackson and Hazlehurst and (1) interviewed teachers, coaches, principals, and district administrators; (2) conducted observations in 16 classrooms, from four-year-olds in Pre-K to seniors in Advanced Placement English; and (3) led 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.

Once in Mississippi, I marveled over everyday practices that educators considered quite ordinary, practices that preceded the literacy focus. In addition to MS's strategies to improve reading outcomes, these unexpected findings will likely be of great interest to friends of education in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont.

### **Rising in the Nation**

Historically, Mississippi (MS) students have performed among the lowest in the country on the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) (NAEP). In 1992, MS 4th graders earned an average score of 199 in reading, which was 16 points below the national average of 215. Perhaps this was due to the state's low per pupil spending, which was [49th in the country](#) that year, or to its high poverty rates, nearly always found [among the 5 poorest in the United States](#). One could assume that a lack of investment in public education among America's poorest communities was the cause of low student outcomes. But that is not what happened. More than two decades after the Barksdale initiative began, in spite of remaining among the bottom 5 states in per pupil expenditure, Mississippi's 4th graders had made exceptional progress in reading on the 2022 NAEP, [ranking 21st in the nation](#).

The climb was gradual and steady. In 2002, the average score of MS 4th graders was 203; in 2013 this increased to 209. This 6-point gain exceeded the national average of 4 points (217 to 221). That year MS passed the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, the first of several laws to establish and fund efforts that could improve reading outcomes in public elementary schools. By 2019, 4th graders in Mississippi earned an average score of 219, the same level as the national average. After the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, in 2022, the national average score on the NAEP was 216. Mississippi had declined as well, but for the first time, surpassed the national average with a score of 217.

What drove the legislature to address literacy instruction? “It is important to note that one driving force for legislation was the fact that Mississippi’s 4th grade students were at least one grade-level behind according to NAEP,” states Mississippi State Literacy Director Kristen Wynn. According to Erica Webber Jones, president of the Mississippi Association of Educators (National Educational Association affiliate), leaders were driven by industry. Large manufacturers would not locate to a state beset by a poorly-prepared workforce. Jones shared that, despite all that Mississippi offers – plentiful land, tax breaks, low cost of living, right-to-work laws – businesses looked elsewhere. She cited the Nissan plant (built in 2003 and employing some 4,000) as widening the possibilities of the state’s economic vitality and attracting the attention of the legislature and governor. Leading school change “was absolutely driven by economics,” said Ms. Jones. “It was not about caring for the kids, the human factor.”

In a [2003 interview](#), Jim Barksdale, who financed the initial efforts to improve literacy instruction in 2000, shared the fact that 22 percent of Americans were functionally illiterate. He elaborated from a business perspective:

That’s a sin for a country that’s this rich. In most industrialized countries now, they have a zero illiteracy rate... Reading is the key to an educated person; an educated person is the key to improving society... Our biggest problem, the thing holding the industry back the most, is the lack of qualified workers; and the problem holding that back is America’s public school system. We’re just not feeding the industry.

Be that as it may, I found that Mississippi teachers’ desire for change was in fact rooted in the human factor. For example, standing alongside her door showcasing the wordplay, “FREEDOM,” Kirksey Middle School’s librarian, Trinette Frazier, said, “If you can’t read, you’re not free.” The bond between reading and freedom was evident in classroom and hallway displays and instructional materials, which prominently featured African-American leaders, from Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglas to Maya Angelou and Barack Obama. Further, Jackson Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education, Dr. Kathleen Grigsby described [No Nonsense Nurturers](#), an approach developed by the education company CT3, in which teachers expect students to rise to the standard and refuse to let them languish in low skills. Dr. Grigsby added, “We expect students to work hard. In the south, people of color have had to work two or three times as hard to get ahead, so kids are expected to work hard, too.”



### Recent Mississippi Education Laws

While a broad discussion of the 2013 [Mississippi Literacy-Based Promotion Act](#) (LBPA) is beyond the scope of this report, what follows is a brief overview of its provisions for achieving its stated goal: “to improve kindergarten and first- through third-grade public school students’ reading skills so that every student completing third-grade reads at or above grade level” (§1.1).

- Every student in grades K–3 who “exhibits a substantial deficiency... must be given intensive reading instruction and intervention *immediately* following the identification...” (§1.2)
- A universal screener must be conducted three times a year, starting within the first 30 days of school (§1.3)
- If the student’s reading deficiency is not remediated before the end of Third Grade, s/he will not be promoted to Fourth Grade “unless a good cause exemption specified under Section 5 of this act is met.” (§2.d)
- “The school district shall assist schools and teachers in implementing reading strategies that *research has shown to be successful in improving reading among students with reading difficulties*” (§5.1.e)
- “A student who is promoted to Fourth Grade with a good cause exemption shall be provided intensive reading instruction and intervention informed by specialized diagnostic information...” (§5.1.e)
- Schools will provide “Intensive instruction services, progress monitoring measures, and support to remediate the identified areas of deficiency, including a minimum, of ninety (90) minutes during regular school hours, scientifically research-based reading instruction...” (§7.a). This can include, but not be limited to:
  - Small-group instruction
  - Reduced teacher - student ratios
  - Tutoring with scientifically-based reading services in addition to the regular school day
  - Transition classes
  - Extended school day, week, or year, and/or summer camps to improve reading
- “Provide to retained Third Graders a *high-performing teacher, as determined by student performance data* on statewide or district assessment, particularly related to student growth in reading” (§7.c)
- “Provide parents and legal guardians of Third Grade students with a “Read at Home” plan outlined in a parental contract, including participation in regular parent-guided home reading.” (§7.d)
- Notify parents of Kindergarten and First- through Third-Grade students exhibiting a reading deficiency;
  - Notification includes a description of the school’s reading services and “proposed supplemental services and supports designed to remediate the identified area of reading deficiency” (§2.c)
- Require the state board of education to adopt policies necessary for the implementation of the program (§9.1)

*(emphasis added)*

In 2014 the Mississippi State Legislature amended the Mississippi Education Code of 1972, [Section 37-177-7](#), to improve reading instruction and teacher training. Among other provisions, this included: (1) conducting a reading intervention pilot in low-performing school districts; (2) creating a kindergarten readiness assessment system; (3) strengthening requirements for elementary teacher licensure; and (4) piloting a middle-school dropout prevention program.

Championing these laws were State Senator Gray Tollison and Governor Phil Bryant. Remaining in state office until 2020, they continued the focus on student literacy needs. Tollison said in an [interview](#), “If we’re ever going to stop the cycle of poverty through education, then we’ve got to start early and get those young people on the right track.”

Appointed by the Mississippi State Board of Education, [Dr. Carey Wright](#) served as State Superintendent of Education from 2013 to 2022. During her tenure, she selected experts in the science of reading and pedagogy to form a team charged with communicating the provisions of new laws and policies; coordinating regional and school-based literacy coaches; and building the capacity of educators at all levels. State Literacy Director Ms. Wynn explained that Dr. Carey restructured the Education Department and created the Office of Elementary Education and Reading, which included the Division of Literacy, Intervention Services, and the Office of Early Childhood.

In 2016, an [amendment to the LBPA](#) required all 3rd graders to attain a higher score on the ELA portion of Mississippi Academic Assessment Program in order to be promoted to the next grade. Additional changes to the LBPA included a provision that all K-3 students participating in intensive reading instruction and intervention would receive an individual reading plan. The plan specifies the individual student’s deficiencies, goals, and benchmarks for growth and progress monitoring, and includes, “research based reading instructional programming ... addressing the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension” (§1(2).e). In addition, the school must provide “[s]trategies for parents and guardians to use in helping the student to succeed in reading proficiency” (§2.e).

In 2020, the Mississippi State Legislature created the [Office of Early Childhood](#) within the Department of Education with the goals of improving the quality of childcare and training of childcare providers; measuring and increasing school readiness; adopting age-appropriate developmental and learning standards and assessments; and harnessing and coordinating

funding. Millions of dollars of state funding were appropriated to expand high-quality childcare programs.

### Reading Performance in Northern New England States

Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont have long enjoyed community and state support for public education, and have not historically struggled to raise adequate education funds as Mississippi has. In Vermont, funding equity, in which every school receives a weighted per pupil expenditure, became a cornerstone in 1997 after the [State Supreme Court](#) determined that every student deserved an “equal educational opportunity.” In all three states, a wide achievement gap between students from low-income families and their more advantaged peers has persisted, as is true across the nation. In contrast, Mississippi’s reading progress has pulled up its low-income learners. On the 2022 NAEP, nearly 26% of low-income 4th graders in Mississippi read on grade level, compared to an average of 22% in the three Northern New England states.

*Figure 3. Comparison of 4th-grade Reading Performance in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Mississippi, and Nationally on the National Assessment of Educational Progress*

Average NAEP Reading Scores of 4th Graders	Maine	New Hampshire	Vermont	Mississippi	National Average
2013	225	232	228	209	222
2022	213	223	217	217	216
2022 Percentage <b>at or above grade level</b> (score of 3 or 4)	29.2%	37%	33.6%	30.6%	32%
2013 - 2022 <b>Change</b> in performance	-12	-9	-11	+8	-6

Since childhood poverty rates in Mississippi are 2.5 times higher than those in Northern New England, a review of the differences in poverty and per pupil expenditure, as well as a closer look at average reading performance by eligibility for free-/reduced-price lunch, are warranted.

*Figure 4. Reading Performance of Students Eligible for Free/Reduced-price Lunch, Childhood Poverty, and Per Pupil Expenditure*

Reading Performance, Poverty Indicators and Per Pupil Expenditure	Maine	New Hampshire	Vermont	Mississippi	National Average
2019 Percentage of <b>4th graders reading on grade level</b> , who qualify for free/reduced-price lunch*	23.2%	21.3%	21.4%	25.9%	21.1%
2019 Percentage of <b>Pre–K–12 students who qualify</b> for free/reduced-price lunch	42%	24.7%	35.1%	74.8%	52.1%
2022 Childhood poverty rate	13.8%	8.9%	10.2%	28.1%	17%
2022 Public education per pupil expenditure	\$15,700	\$17,500	\$21,200	\$9,300	\$14,840

\*Most recent figures available

*Figure 5. Comparison of 4th-grade Reading Performance on the NAEP by Eligibility for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch*

Average NAEP Reading Scores of 4th Graders	Maine	New Hampshire	Vermont	Mississippi	National Average
2022 <b>Not eligible</b> for free/reduced-price lunch	223	228	227	236	231
2022 <b>Eligible</b> for free/reduced-price lunch	197	204	202	212	203
<b>Difference in scores</b> between the two demographic groups	26	24	25	24	28

The cut score for demonstrating proficiency on NAEP is 238. Mississippi students ineligible for free/reduced-price lunch scored the closest at 236, followed by New Hampshire at 228, Vermont at 227, and Maine at 223. The [NAEP basic score](#), which is “partial mastery of the knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at a given grade,” is 208. Only low-income students in Mississippi surpassed the basic level with an average score of 212, though this remains far short of proficient. The score is 4 points below basic in New Hampshire (204); 6 points below in Vermont (202); and 11 points below in Maine (197). Nationally, low-income students score 5 points below Basic (203). (The NAEP advanced level score is 268.) These results demonstrate that, contrary to

conventional thinking, students from low-income families, when given evidence-based instruction, can learn to read.

### **Research Results**

#### **#1 Students are ready to participate in evidence-based instruction.**

In every school and at every grade level, I observed students ready for their teachers' direction and instruction. All had the materials needed to complete the tasks at hand, and when they finished, they waited silently for the next activity. When they volunteered to answer a question or needed help, they raised their hands and waited for the teacher or instructional assistant to respond. They utilized their executive functioning skills for making decisions on their learning and behavior. Teachers reinforced expectations. To a student ready to present at the whiteboard, his teacher said, "Speak loud and in a complete sentence." Hazlehurst Elementary School Principal Ms. Kim Lockett-Langston explained, "Scholars know the expectations of scholar behavior. When not working, they sit in a scholar position." High expectations for student behavior during instruction are grounded in the belief that public education serves all children. Assistant Superintendent Dr. Grigsby stated, "We share the belief that children of subpar circumstances can still learn."

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#### **#2 School and classroom procedures reflect high learning expectations.**

Fidelity in the implementation of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) was expected at every school I visited. Promoted by State Education Departments/Agency in Northern New England, this system involves direct instruction of behavior expectations and classroom procedures, followed by predictable consequences for violations and rewards for compliance. North Jackson Elementary School Principal Miss Jocelyn Smith observes and greets her 380 students as they enter each morning. She speaks individually to any students who struggled behaviorally the previous day. As part of PBIS, students recite the PAWS community pledge daily, receive points for "being caught doing good," benefit from positive "Shout Outs," and attend monthly celebrations organized by the school counselor.

Adhering to the PBIS approach, the principal of Wilkins Elementary School, Mrs. Cheryl Brown, shared that, since some students needed more support, every classroom utilizes a "calm-down corner." She also provides a squeeze-ball fidget to students who struggle with behavior. In addition, Mrs. Brown manages a daily morning and afternoon [check-in/check-out](#)

[process](#), which has been shown to be helpful for students who struggle with self-regulation. Rarely has she used physical restraint in a school of 400 students, “perhaps two or three times in six years,” she said. Seclusion, the “involuntary confinement of a student alone in any room or area” is not practiced in Jackson ([U.S. Department of Justice, 2023](#)). While Mississippi is [one of 17 states in the country](#) permitting corporal punishment in public education, the practice can be prohibited by school districts, as Jackson has done. Ms. Butler of The Barksdale Reading Institute shared that a condition of providing professional teacher training in a school district was the prohibition of corporal punishment.

At Hazlehurst, Ms. Luckett-Langston explained that all educators were expected to teach students their classroom procedures, from when to sharpen a pencil or use the restroom, to how to ask for help or transition between activities. As part of the school’s new-teacher orientation, she demonstrates classroom procedures and offers a model to follow. She felt this component was so important that every fall teachers are required to submit a completed checklist of their classroom procedures.

Finely detailed, these steps were embedded in the PBIS system. With a teacher and instructional aide (IA) in every Pre–K–2 classroom (Pre–K–1 in Jackson), response time was very short. To avoid missing instruction, all K–5 students in Hazlehurst Elementary take their restroom break together, standing in the hall and quietly chatting with classmates until their turn. Similarly, Wilkins Elementary is one of four Jackson schools with a hallway buddy system. When children need to leave the classroom, their assigned partners join and monitor them. Principal Brown stated that, after using the restroom, the buddy checks afterwards to make sure the area is clean and the excused student washes hands properly and quickly returns to class.

In Kirksey Middle School, the 6th-grade teacher team taught and reinforced common classroom procedures. “Behavior problems are more likely to occur in electives,” a teacher explained. The team praised the approach of their colleague Miss Miller. This young math teacher described herself as, “having patience, persistence, routine, and following through, including calls home. And they know I will.” As an example of her high expectations, she said, as if to a class, “We’re not going to talk loud here.”

Dr. Grigsby explained that establishing and adhering to procedures creates the environment needed for students to learn. “The reason why students are motivated is because of your [the teachers’] belief in them. If you believe the kids can do it, then they will. At the end of


the day, the structures of schools are the same everywhere, but what makes them great is the relationships between teachers and their students. The will to learn is about relationships.” She added, “PBIS teaches self-control. Without self-control, you don’t have agency for yourself or others.”

*Figure 6: An Excerpt of Procedures That Teachers Must Establish in a Jackson Elementary School*

**Additional Procedures**

You can integrate more sophisticated routines into your classroom gradually. Teach your students the following procedures a few at a time for best results.

- Going to the office (when getting picked up or visiting the nurse)
- How to behave when there are classroom visitors
- What to do during assemblies
- Where, when, and how to submit homework
- Returning classroom supplies to their places
- Handling classroom equipment (i.e. scissors)
- Getting ready for lunch, recess, or specials
- Transitioning to the next class (3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> Grades)
- How to safely use a computer
- Participating in learning centers
- What to do during announcements



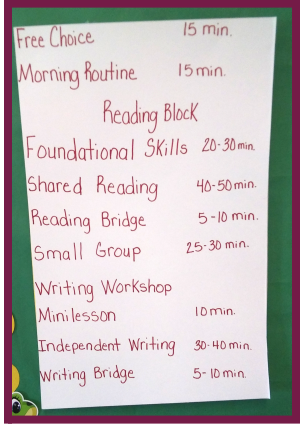
### **#3 The school day and year address students’ learning needs.**

The school day for students begins at 7:30 or 7:45 AM, usually with “morning work,” a 2-page packet of literacy and math practice, drawn from the district’s adopted curricula. Jackson schools start at 7:30 AM and end at 2:30 PM. At Hazlehurst, school starts at 7:45 AM and ends at 3:00 PM. In addition, schools offer 30 minutes of morning tutoring, starting at 7:00 or 7:15. In grades K-3, students receive 120 minutes of literacy instruction daily. In grades 4-5, literacy instruction is 90 minutes. At Jackson’s Kirksey Middle School, grades 6-8 attend a 90-minute English Language Arts class and a 90-minute reading class, following an A/B long-block schedule, totalling 7.5 hours of weekly literacy instruction. Reading class sections are organized by instructional needs.

Jackson Schools offer after-school and summer-learning programs in grades K-12. For students entering pre-kindergarten, Jackson offered 19 days of summer school from 7:30 AM to 3:00 PM, taught by Pre-K teachers, who introduce class procedures and pre-teach the curriculum. At Hazlehurst, summer school runs from 7:30 AM to 12:30 PM 4 days a week, focused primarily on literacy. In addition, Hazlehurst offers one week of summer kindergarten for children to become acclimated to attending school, getting to know their teacher, and learning classroom routines. Developmental screeners are conducted during summer kindergarten for more effective placement and instructional decisions before the school year begins.



*Figure 7: Hazlehurst Elementary School Reading Block Schedule*

Free Choice	15 min.	
Morning Routine	15 min.	
Reading Block		
Foundational Skills	20-30 min.	
Shared Reading	40-50 min.	
Reading Bridge	5-10 min.	
Small Group	25-30 min.	
Writing Workshop Minilesson	10 min	
Independent Writing	30-40 min.	
Writing Bridge	5-10 min.	
		classroom photo

#### #4 Highly-motivated educators fully focus on literacy instruction.

In 2013, when the Literacy-Based Promotion Act was passed by the Mississippi Legislature, “many teachers weren’t knowledgeable,” explained a principal in the focus group. “In college, teachers got very few reading courses, but that’s changing now. I work with all our school’s student teachers and they’re much stronger in the science of reading.” Another principal shared, “We are much more intentional with our programs, resources, and partners. That’s a big difference now.” At the roundtable, a principal said, “ELA performance was among the lowest, but we felt excitement that we would see improvement by students passing the exam.” A lead 2nd-grade teacher said, “All I know about phonics I learned myself to get my babies through. I had to find what they needed.” Confirming this slower transition at the college level, Barksdale CEO Ms. Butler lamented, “If we could get higher education to do this, our problems would go away.”

The Mississippi Department of Education offers the [AIM’s Pathways to Proficient Reading and Pathways to Literacy Leadership](#) coursework. Participating teachers learn about science of reading research and “best practices for language and literacy instruction in the classroom,” which involves online learning modules, in-person training, coaching, and 12-month access to the AIM Pathways Platform. For administrators, AIM Pathways provides professional development in structured literacy and supports their creation of a literacy plan for their organization.

Mississippi Association of Educators President Jones shared the seismic shift brought about by LBPA she experienced as a teacher.

At first there was a lot of pushback, especially the focus on third grade, which we thought was too late. Parents were mad and worried about their kids being retained... Then we went full-speed ahead. Teaching grades K-2 had a lot of pressure unlike anything before. In Jackson, literacy coaches pulled resources for teachers. Teachers got intensive reading training. There were workshops every week. We learned explicit phonics and [DIBELS](#) (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills). Hearing we'd get coaches was a huge relief. Our colleagues became coaches, so we'd worked with them before. We'd written lesson plans together. The state did right by hiring excellent coaches.

Ms. Jones described teachers' transformation from fear to advocacy.

There was conversation about the number of minutes needed for instruction. Teachers advocated, saying 90 minutes were not enough and pushing for 120. Science and social studies teachers received training in the five components of reading and how to teach vocabulary... Think tanks formed to ask educators their opinions."

At Van Winkle Elementary School, teachers have learned to analyze assessment results and create small groups for targeted literacy instruction. When planning heterogeneous groups for other activities, they place top students with weaker students to serve as a model and support their peers. In this data-driven decision making, principal Ashanti Barnes explained, "Teachers are like doctors. They have to diagnose and treat the deficits. It would be educational malpractice to miss opportunities to meet their needs."

Hazlehurst Principal Luckett-Langston faced the challenge of supervising many teachers with provisional licenses. She said, "We have 'expert citizens.' If I can build your capacity, then we can build your students." Many Hazlehurst teachers voluntarily attend literacy training on Saturdays and vacation days. She maintains a Google Classroom for her teachers' professional development, and produces videos of herself teaching specific literacy skills for staff to master. "The pressure to attend training comes from other teachers. We needed to put in more grit and grind, build the plane as we fly it," she said. "When you're an F school, you've got pressure. We were F for a long time, then moved to D. Now we expect to be a B school this year."

**#5 Principals and teachers fully embrace coaching.**

Starting in 2014, the Mississippi Department of Education offered literacy professional development to K-3 educators and literacy coaches to schools with the lowest achievement levels. With \$15 million of annual funding that continues today, many coaches were selected from the teacher ranks, who have expanded their roles to offer teacher observation and feedback cycles, provide professional development, and support curriculum implementation. “Coaches became the Department of Education’s boots on the ground,” Principal Barnes said. “Teachers want to please and do right. They are very open to feedback,” explained Principal Smith.

Many principals became well-versed in the science of reading and observed teachers’ instruction on a near daily basis. Assistant principals have assumed responsibility for day-to-day operational management in order to free principals to focus on teaching and learning. Principal Brown stated that, nearly every morning, she supported teachers and students during literacy instruction from 7:30 to 10:30 AM. In the afternoon, from 12:45 to 2:30, she taught small groups reading or math, arranged by teachers based on student performance data. Like all Jackson principals, she was expected to use [Learning Walks](#) as a classroom observation tool and utilize [CT3](#) for emailing teachers immediate feedback.

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**#6 Frequent assessment, data analysis, and reporting inform teachers’ instruction and motivate students to perform their best.**

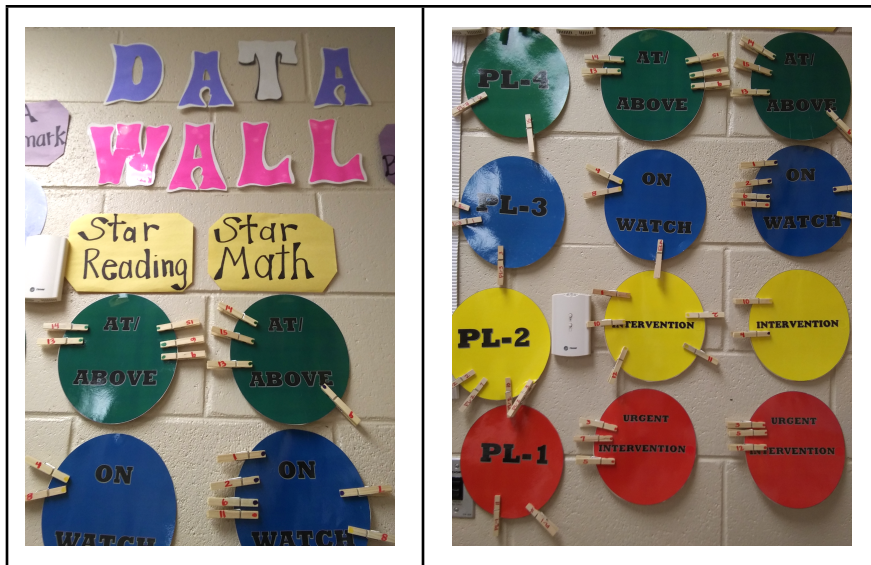
The ubiquity of the teachers’ practices in analyzing student performance data is woven throughout these findings, as the culture of education in Mississippi is replete with data-based decision making. In keeping with the spirit and letter of the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, teachers remediate and accelerate based on their students’ performance on curriculum-based assessments (CBMs), practicing or advancing in the school’s literacy program(s). Benchmark assessments are administered quarterly and progress monitoring is conducted three times a year. At the elementary schools visited, all standardized assessments are completed online. Additionally, in spring of kindergarten and fall of 1st grade, students are screened for reading difficulties, such as risk of dyslexia. In every Jackson elementary classroom, two thick binders are readily available: one for curriculum manuals and the other for student performance data.

In classrooms and hallways, student data was prominently posted. Creative examples abounded. One large sign in Murrah High School read, “Passing or Proficient,” accompanied by

students' signatures. In several schools, students received a 1- or 2-digit ID number and found their assessment scores on display, as seen in Figure 6. Handwritten posters listing standards and percentages of students attaining them were a common sight.

Principals and coaches led student performance data analysis during team and faculty meetings. Principal Barnes explained, "We need to make sure we know what our students need. If support is not addressing the lowest learning needs, it's not helpful. All help is not good help."

*Figure 8. Data Displays of Student Performance on Renaissance Star*



## **#7 Pre-K builds the foundation as the model of educational excellence.**

Repeatedly principals mentioned the need for strong early elementary education. During the roundtable, an administrator voiced support for mandated kindergarten in Mississippi, "This is the elephant in the room, comparing students who attended Pre-K and K to students new to school in 1st grade." In addition, principals felt that play-based childcare centers did not teach children the skills needed for elementary school. "In third grade, those kids are behind, failing, and sometimes considered disabled," a school leader complained.

Jackson's Van Winkle Early Education Center provides literacy and other training to childcare providers at Head Start and private centers. Open Monday to Friday, 7:00 AM to 6:00 PM, the school building can serve up to 25 classrooms, currently with enrollment for 19. Most students attend starting age 4; students eligible for special education can begin age 3. Van Winkle provides free transportation across the city as well as breakfast, lunch, snack, and dinner. A

summer program is offered to incoming students to maximize school-year hours devoted to instruction. A lead teacher, Kathleen Billiot, whose classroom serves as a model for teacher training, stated, “There is a growth mindset from the top. We are intentional about creating a strong start. We know what they need to do in early literacy, and we can see many are already behind.”

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

The rate of students qualifying for special education is lower in Mississippi than in Northern New England. According to [Education Week](#), in 2022, 15.2% of Mississippi students were eligible. In New Hampshire, the lowest of the three states, the rate was 17.3%. In Vermont and Maine, the rates were 18.4% and 20%, respectively. Jackson Schools Executive Director of Exceptional [Special] Education, Dr. Talatha Bingham-Gibbs, explained the goal was “full inclusion first.” While some students had access to an instructional assistant (paraeducator), she estimated only 3 of the 20,401 students enrolled in Jackson Schools were assigned a 1:1 IA. Instead special educators frequently teach alongside classroom teachers. Only special educators who have trained to become highly qualified in reading and/or math can provide specialized pull-out services. The Jackson School District also maintains a day treatment program to address mental-health concerns, with the goal of returning students to their home school. At the time of my visit, Dr. Bingham-Gibbs stated that just 7 students attended the program.

By statute, Mississippi requires public schools to provide 5 hours per week of gifted education in grades 2-6. Each year students are chosen based on assessments and creativity. At Hazlehurst, the principal described gifted activities as community-minded to develop leadership. She shared, “They’ve recycled over 80,000 plastic bottles and planted a pollinator garden. We equip them with the tools to do that.”

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

In Jackson, every classroom in grades Pre–K-1 included a full-time instructional assistant who worked alongside the classroom teacher. At Hazlehurst, classroom IAs expanded into 2nd grade. Describing their role at Hazlehurst, Principal Luckett-Langston explained that IAs provide struggling students learning, social, and emotional support; assist during small-group or

whole-class instruction; and, when teachers are absent, continue instruction with the curriculum. IAs receive literacy and other training during the school day and other times, often alongside classroom teachers, since they share a planning period (40-50 minutes) while students attend electives.

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

Most school observations I conducted in Mississippi took place in Pre–K-2 classrooms. End-of-year state assessments had been administered earlier that month, and teachers now devoted the literacy block to reviewing grade-level standards, since many students had not yet achieved benchmarks. Usually teachers read from curriculum manuals selected by the district, such as *Foundations*, *Wit and Wisdom*, *My View Literacy* (Savvas), *Wonders 2020*, among others. Districts purchase materials from among the [5 ELA curricular programs](#) approved by the Mississippi Department of Education. At the roundtable, a principal explained, “At one time, using the teacher’s manual was frowned upon. Now it’s considered best practice.” Another principal stated that, equipped with evidence-based, sequential programs, “The teacher is more targeted and on task. The text builds the background knowledge so kids have more to talk about.”

Not every elementary teacher I observed was well prepared to teach literacy. This barrier may be compounded by alternative licensure programs, provisional licenses, and teaching outside one’s endorsement area. Nevertheless, by mandating specific curricula be taught, students gain immediate access to high-quality instructional materials (HQIM). Repeated practice with HQIM may increase students’ literacy skills in spite of teachers’ limitations, at least in the short-term. For example, I observed two teachers who, based on their feedback to students, appeared to have little exposure to the foundations of English. When mentioned at the Jackson leadership roundtable, there were nods of agreement. However the Director of Exceptional Education disagreed, saying that special educators were required to complete science of reading coursework. In addition, teachers may have attended training in specific HQIM curricula, but haven’t yet mastered central tenets of structured-literacy instruction, such as identifying all 250 graphemes that represent the 44 sounds of English; understanding when students make phonological vs. orthographic spelling errors; or catching students who confuse

minimal pairs, such /k/ and /g/, mispronouncing *market* as “marget.” The LETRS training offered by the State Department of Education was optional. A principal declared, “It is incumbent on leaders to fill these gaps.”

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### **Recommendations from Mississippi Education Leaders**

The focus-group interview arranged by Dr. Grigsby took place on April 25, 2023, which approximately 25 district- and school-based administrators, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders attended. Their voices are echoed throughout this report. However, I asked one final question: Based on your experiences with the Literacy-Based Promotion Act that led to sweeping changes from the state to the local level, what do you recommend for education in Northern New England, and what do you *not* recommend we do?

Their insights warrant the attention of leaders in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont when considering strategies to raise student reading performance. While some of these views have been interspersed throughout, these were their parting words.

1. Expect principals to do Learning Walks and visit classrooms daily.
  2. Train teachers to be researchers so instruction is based on evidence.
  3. Start high-quality training with kindergarten teachers.
  4. Provide before- and after-school programs for addressing deficits.
  5. Phase in high-stakes testing to allow schools to prepare.
  6. Include social-emotional learning.
  7. *Don't* give school ratings.
  8. Start accountability *before* 3rd grade.
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### **Conclusion**

While the extraordinary progress Mississippi has made to improve student reading performance has received the recognition of journalists and academicians it deserves, this research highlights the voices on the ground. By sharing observations of literacy instruction and the perspectives of teachers, coaches, and administrators, a fuller picture of everyday school



practices has been rendered. Educators and state leaders in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont are the primary audience of this research project, though friends of education in other states may benefit from grappling with the findings as well.

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' increased reading skills were incremental and steady, paving the way for the governor and legislature to support laws compelling all public schools to follow suit. Their collective action moved the state from the country's bottom to equalling or surpassing two of the three states of Northern New England.

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. Classroom and whole-school norms and procedures allowed both teachers and students to grow in a safe, orderly environment. In every classroom beginning in Pre-K and continuing through the end of 1st or 2nd grade, an instructional assistant supported individual and small groups of students while their teacher provided direct instruction without interruption. Grades K-2 are crucial years for preparing the groundwork of alphabetics, 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 I 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.