

THE LITERACY & JUSTICE FOR ALL BILL PACKAGE

LITERACY PLAN

SB2243 (Lightford)

HB2872 (Mayfield)

LITERACY GRANTS

SB2244 (Lightford)

HB2865 (Mayfield)

COMPREHENSIVE BILL

SB2245 (Lightford)

HB 3147 (Faver Dias)

Q: *What is the problem with literacy in Illinois?*

A: The Illinois literacy crisis is urgent but solvable. About 40% of Illinois students lack ‘basic’ reading skills, according to the Nation’s Report Card. When students miss out on evidence-based literacy instruction early on, the consequences last a lifetime. **According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, students who cannot read by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school; and those non-proficient third graders in low-income families are six times more likely to drop out.** The Prison Literacy Project estimates that 60% of inmates are struggling readers.

Q: *What is in each of the bills?*

A: SB2243/HB2872 requires the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to create a comprehensive literacy plan.

SB2244/HB2865 modifies the Reading Improvement Block Grant (RIBG) program, which has been unfunded since FY10. Previously, the RIBG had a \$68 million allocation awarded to school districts based 70% on enrollment and 30% on poverty. The bill states that if the appropriation is less than \$15 million, only Tier 1 and 2 districts are eligible and that ISBE may further narrow the criteria so that several districts that choose to overhaul their literacy programs qualify. This will provide data that will be beneficial as the State considers more comprehensive literacy policy.

SB2245/HB3147 creates the comprehensive Literacy & Justice for All Act. It includes the contents of the first two bills and adds provisions for ISBE to create tools to support high-quality

curriculum (a curriculum evaluation tool and template for district-level literacy plans) and to support educators (literacy microcredential(s), statewide training modules, and a professional development evaluation tool). It also requires Educator Preparation Programs to include coursework in evidence-based reading methods and administer a state-paid test of foundational reading skills to teacher candidates. Candidates need not achieve a certain score, but can earn an additional credential if they pass. The aggregated pass rates would be reported publicly and considered upon program re-approval.

Q: *Why three separate bills?*

A: The comprehensive Literacy & Justice for All Act reflects numerous changes, responding to suggestions after engaging in numerous conversations with a wide variety of stakeholders since the introduction of the Right to Read Act in 2022. The Illinois Early Literacy Coalition wanted to provide the public with an opportunity to see the revisions that have been discussed. This is not an agreed to bill, but it has come a long way.

The simplest of the three bills would have ISBE develop a comprehensive literacy plan, which would provide legislative support for the endeavor that ISBE has begun working toward after its literacy summit in October 2022.

The stand-alone reading grants bill reflects one of the areas that saw the most openness among other stakeholders. By providing funding and measuring impact on a small number of districts that voluntarily adopt literacy reforms, the state would gain valuable information before making broader policy changes.

Q: What are the components of reading comprehension?



The Simple View of Reading says that reading comprehension is the product of the words one can recognize and the language one understands. Students need to have explicit, sequential, and systematic instruction to ensure they develop their skills in both areas. “Word recognition” primarily refers to having the phonemic awareness to differentiate the sounds in words and the phonics skills to decode them. When these skills are developed early, they become increasingly automatic – like riding a bike. **Strong readers will effortlessly and instantly recognize words, freeing up their mental capacity for understanding, analyzing, critiquing, making inferences, connecting text on the page to their background knowledge, and otherwise comprehending the language on the page.** “Language comprehension” is also developed early through conversing, reading books to children, and otherwise building their vocabulary and content knowledge through oral language. **It is only when strong language comprehension is paired with strong decoding ability that children can be proficient readers.**

Q: My kids learned to read just fine under the current approach. Why do we need a change?

A: Reading is complex and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Emerging readers need some combination of instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics (decoding), spelling (encoding), fluency, vocabulary development, comprehension skills, background knowledge, content area instruction, grammar, and print concepts, but **how much each student needs in each of those areas is heavily dependent on the unique needs of the individual student.**

Some students will learn to read regardless of which instructional approach is used. But with the current approach, 60 percent of our students are left behind. For the majority of students, explicit and systematic instruction to connect

speech sounds to printed letters is needed in order to “crack the code.” Others will learn to decode and still be unable to comprehend the meaning of connected text, often because of lack of exposure to background knowledge and vocabulary. When students are not exposed to evidence-based core curriculum, it becomes more challenging for schools to determine who needs remediation to reinforce the skills they learn in their general classroom. Illinois cannot remediate our way out of a problem that impacts so many students.

Q: How will this improve outcomes for English Learners?

A: The bill affirms that English Learners benefit from a comprehensive literacy approach that recognizes the value of multilingualism by enveloping all areas of literacy instruction with a deep focus on oral language development and encouraging students to make connections between English and their home language.

Frankly, some Bilingual Education advocates have raised concerns that literacy reforms in other states have de-emphasized the value of biliteracy and oral language development, which would be a tremendous disservice to English Learners and Illinois. The Illinois Early Literacy Coalition continues to engage in regular discussions with other bilingual education advocates to ensure that Illinois’ literacy efforts are inclusive and that any reforms meet the needs of all students.

Q: How will this improve outcomes for students who speak English language variations from standardized English?

A: Students who grow up speaking English language variations, such as African American English (AAE), face unique challenges in literacy learning in a standardized American English (SAE) environment. AAE is guided by its own specific rules for grammar, syntax, and pronunciation. Lack of respect for language variations also presents challenges, as educators may mistake dialectal features as a speech/language concern or, alternatively, may miss red flags that would necessitate further speech/language support

by attributing those characteristics to dialect. Understanding phonological, morphological, and grammatical/syntactical features of English language variations will mitigate these challenges and enable more effective reading instruction.

Students who speak English Language variations will learn academic English at school and, like all students, that requires skill development through with attention to expanding background knowledge using culturally relevant sources as well as attention to word recognition. Many factors drive the demographic gaps in academic outcomes, and there is no doubt that poverty, disparities in access to high-quality childcare and preschool, lack of access to books at home, and lack of culturally and linguistically responsive and inclusive curricula are some of the causes. However, a lack of effective literacy instruction is a driver of Illinois' deep inequities. By abandoning ineffective and unproven methods and embracing evidence-based instruction, all students can become literate.

Q: How much does this cost?

A: Members of the Illinois Early Literacy Coalition support a small (~\$200,000) appropriation to enable ISBE to hire a Literacy Director to lead the work developing curriculum and training supports. A small (around \$5 million) appropriation to the Reading Improvement Block Grant would enable several schools to thoughtfully and expeditiously pilot evidence-based literacy program reforms. Beginning in FY2026, a \$2 million appropriation would be required to fund foundational reading assessments for teacher candidates. Some states have allocated significant funds to support their literacy efforts, while others have changed policy without adding funding.

More funding would certainly expedite districts' ability to move more quickly to implement evidence-based reading reforms. However, it makes sense to allocate most of this funding increase to the Evidence-Based Funding (EBF) Formula, which flows equitably to school districts with the least resources and most student need.

Increasing EBF funding will help schools support their students' literacy development, though it is not specifically earmarked for that purpose. Literacy outcomes will also be improved by funding the Early Childhood Block Grant, which is equitably distributed and highly effective, particularly in oracy, content knowledge, vocabulary development, and exposure to books and print concepts. **Not all funds expended on literacy have been spent on research-aligned materials and programs, which is why the literacy supports in this bill package are critical; however, without equitable funding overall, Illinois will never achieve equitable literacy outcomes.**

Q: Are there any mandates for school districts in the Literacy & Justice for All Act?

A: No. There is a requirement for the State Board of Education (ISBE) to offer support to districts and educators, but there is no mandate that districts undertake these changes.

Q: Does the bill require teacher candidates to pass another licensure test?

A: No. Instead, **teacher candidates who seek licensure in certain areas (early childhood, elementary education, special education, and principal) after September 1, 2025 would take a State-funded test of foundational reading skills and earn an additional credential if they pass, but face no penalty or barrier to licensure no matter their score.** Data on the proportion of candidates passing the test would be publicly reported and considered when programs are reappraised. The assessment would be paid for with a State appropriation and be provided at no cost to candidates. Less than \$2 million would be needed to fund the assessment.

Q: What is a microcredential?

A: A microcredential is a smaller, shorter program of study or demonstration of skill mastery that is specifically focused on one subject area. ISBE would officially attach the designation to the individual's Professional Educator License or other credential awarded by the agency.

Q: Does this include early screening?

A: No. The Literacy & Justice for All Act primarily deals with whole class instructional changes through teacher training and curricular guidance. The bills to require universal early literacy screening are **HB 1124 (Mussman)** and **SB 343 (Belt)**. These bills complement Literacy & Justice for All bill package.

Q: Does this bill retain students who cannot read by third grade?

A: No.

Q: What are other states doing about literacy?

A: Most other states have undertaken significant policy change over the last decade to improve literacy, and **most national analyses identify Illinois as one of the states that has done the least to advance literacy**. While this is true across several policy areas, Illinois does have some strong components already in place to support literacy development. Most notably, **the Illinois literacy standards for elementary teachers in Educator Preparation Programs are particularly strong. Illinois also has strong bilingual education laws as well.** In addition, the Illinois State Board of Education has recently convened a broad group of education stakeholders to work toward literacy improvements.

Some states have achieved incredible results from comprehensive reforms, most notably Mississippi, which closed the gap from having nearly the lowest reading scores in the country to now meeting the national average. Although most states have tried, not all have shown successful results. Strong leadership from education agencies is key to successful implementation.

Q: Why is the bill silent on many of the other factors that impact literacy and academic success, such as preschool access, social-emotional learning, teacher shortages, hunger, and housing insecurity?

A: The Literacy & Justice for All bill package aims to be comprehensive and inclusive of reforms that directly impact students and teachers to support excellent literacy instruction. There is no doubt that many other factors impact a student's literacy success, from in-school factors like equitable funding, preschool access, full-day kindergarten, sufficient numbers of qualified teachers and bus drivers, and student safety – to out-of-school factors like poverty, trauma, hunger, housing insecurity, and health care access. This is a complex issue and one bill cannot tackle it all; however, we are supporting other efforts to dramatically increase early childhood access and a significant increase in Evidence-Based Funding this year.

Q: Is this just re-hashing the “reading wars” of the 90s?

A: The so-called “reading wars” pitted advocates for a phonics-based approach against supporters of a *whole language* approach. Whole language supporters believed the best way to teach children to read was to immerse them in a literature-rich environment and instill a love of reading. Phonics advocates supported breaking down words into their component parts, teaching children sound-letter correspondence.

The reading wars of the 90s were “settled” by the 2000 National Reading Panel, which examined hundreds of research studies about how children learn to read and arrived at the conclusion that effective reading instruction focuses on five pillars: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Research strongly suggested that explicit, systematic, sequential, and cumulative phonics instruction, and early exposure to language, reading aloud, building background knowledge, and developing a complex vocabulary are critical. “Literacy” is broader than reading and additional elements, such as writing, grammar, and oral language development are also integral components of a comprehensive literacy program.

Many *balanced literacy* programs grew out of these findings. But despite the importance of balance, many of the curricula that grew out of that movement were not actually aligned to research. For instance, some programs labeled as “balanced literacy” provide an isolated phonics lesson without opportunities to practice those phonics skills in connected text. They might rely heavily on memorization of sight words, rather than teaching phonics patterns. Often, such programs will include leveled readers, which teach students to memorize a text pattern and look at the pictures to “read,” rather than requiring them to make meaning out of the text on the page. Programs also may supply numerous

books without careful thought about how those resources support culturally-relevant background knowledge and vocabulary development.

Q: *What is the Illinois Early Literacy Coalition?*

A: The Early Literacy Coalition started in the spring of 2021 after several isolated pockets of literacy advocates – mostly parents and educators – discovered that similar groups existed throughout all corners of Illinois, and that they could make a bigger impact for children who are struggling to read by formalizing their network. Visit the Coalition’s website at ILEarlyLiteracy.org.