

# MAKING EARLY LITERACY POLICY WORK IN KENTUCKY: THREE CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS ON THE "READ TO SUCCEED" ACT



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## I. Executive Summary

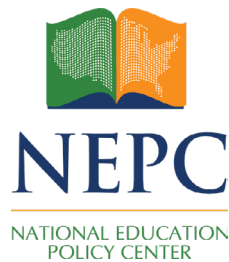
In recent decades, state policymakers across the country have turned to early literacy policies to address students' reading proficiency—particularly in third grade. Though states' policies vary widely in terms of the interventions and supports provided to educators and students, their intent is similar: to get students reading on grade level by the end of third grade. As of 2021, 46 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) have at least one policy related to third-grade literacy. Nineteen of these states have retention-based policies—meaning that they identify for retention third graders whose state assessment results fall below an established cut score. Ultimately, the goal of these policies is to improve students' early reading skills.

In 2021, in response to downward-trending reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and its own state assessment, Kentucky considered legislation similar to that introduced and enacted in states across the U.S., framing what would be one such early literacy policy. This "Read to Succeed" Act had not passed by the end of the 2021 legislative session, which ended on March 30. This brief, however, uses Kentucky's "Read to Succeed" Act as a way to explore the promise and limitations of third-grade literacy policies and provide guidance for policymakers in states that may consider enacting them in the future.

Research suggests that early literacy policies may be effective at improving student achievement in the short term. However, these policies do not include a full range of best practices in literacy instruction. In particular, many states' policies require literacy instruction in the "Big Five" components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) identified by a 2000 National Reading Panel report. However, experts have noted that evidence-based literacy instruction goes beyond these five components, and literacy instruction emphasizing the Big Five has been found to be ineffective in improving

literacy achievement. Lastly, policymakers have developed third-grade literacy policies in ways that pose implementation challenges for educators. A review of the research on early literacy policies leads to the following recommendations for policymakers as they strive to ensure the efficacy of these policies:

- Instead of limiting the legislation to the “Big Five” components of reading, include a set of instructional best practices in literacy.
- Ensure initial, ongoing, and targeted professional development in literacy for K-3 teachers.
- Show educators that their expertise is valued by involving them in the development of the policy. This can be done by soliciting feedback through an open online comment period, conducting focus groups with a representative group of K-3 educators, and/or involving educators in the creation of various components of the policy.



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## II. Introduction

State policymakers have recently turned to early literacy policies to address students' reading proficiency—particularly in grades K-3. Though these policies vary in terms of the interventions and supports provided to educators and students, their intent is similar: to get students reading on grade level by the end of third grade. As of 2021, 46 states and D.C. have some type of third-grade reading policy, and 19 are retention-based—meaning third graders whose state reading assessment scores fall below the established cut score are identified for retention.<sup>1</sup>

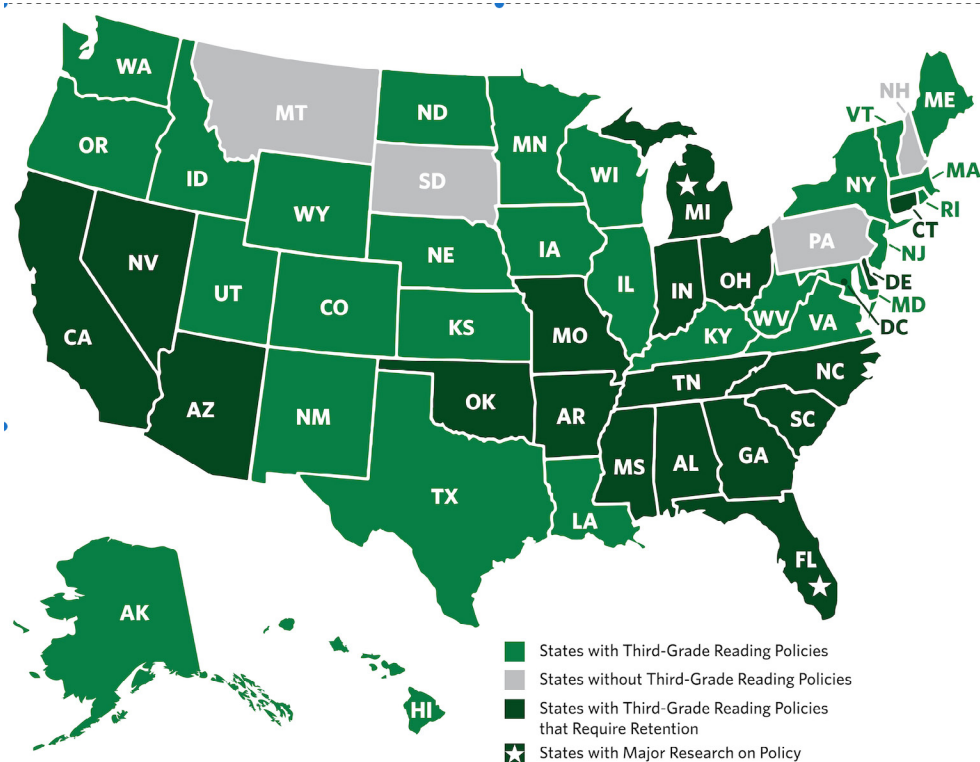
The current wave of early literacy policies followed from research and policy efforts at the federal level in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 1997, Congress called for the establishment of a National Reading Panel to review the existing evidence surrounding the best ways to teach reading.<sup>2</sup> Their findings were the origin of the "Big Five": that the best approach to reading instruction included explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.<sup>3</sup> In 1998, the National Research Council published a report similarly concluding that reading ability is determined by multiple factors, including knowledge, language, and other internal processes.<sup>4</sup> That same year, the Department of Education implemented the Reading Excellence Act, awarding \$210 million each year in state grants from 1998 to 2000 to improve K-3 literacy instruction.<sup>5</sup>

Then, in 2001, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act. The Act authorized Reading First, a grant program administered by the U.S. Department of Education that allocated funding to implement evidence-based reading instruction and to hire literacy coaches to support reading achievement in grades K-3.<sup>6</sup> The Reading First program was based on evidence indicating that high-quality early literacy instruction improves later outcomes for students, and promoted the research that had been conducted by the National Research

Council and the National Reading Panel.<sup>7</sup> Although the program has expired, its influence is evident in states' early literacy policies that still emphasize evidence-based literacy instruction and instructional support for teachers.

In 2021, Kentucky introduced legislation that would have led to such a policy, but the legislative session expired at the end of March without it passing. This was not the first time the state had introduced early literacy legislation: In 2019, Kentucky policymakers introduced a third-grade literacy policy that included a required retention component, and in 2020, policymakers introduced another version without retention—both of which failed to gain traction.<sup>8</sup> The latest proposal, KY HB 270 and its accompanying KY SB 115, like the others before it, was called the “Read to Succeed” Act.<sup>9</sup> Though the state scored two points above the national average in fourth-grade reading on the 2019 administration of NAEP, 33% of students scored below basic and Kentucky’s scores have been trending downwards in recent years.<sup>10</sup> In 2019, Kentucky fourth graders’ NAEP reading scores were the lowest since 2005, and were no longer significantly different from the national average for the first time since 2007.<sup>11</sup> Trends have been similar on the Kentucky Performance Rating for Educational Progress (K-PREP), the state’s standardized assessment. The percentage of third graders scoring at least proficient in reading on K-PREP is lower than it was five years ago, with just over half of students meeting this benchmark.<sup>12</sup> The “Read to Succeed” Act aimed to establish a long-term effort to improve these outcomes.

**Figure 1. Map of States’ with Third-Grade Reading Policies**



Information from Michigan State University’s Education Policy Innovation Collaborative.

Source: Michigan State University’s Education Policy Innovation Collaborative.

Kentucky would not have been alone in passing such a policy. As of 2021, 46 states and D.C. have a third-grade literacy policy in place (see Figure 1).<sup>13</sup> The proliferation of such policies began in 2002, when Florida enacted its policy alongside its statewide literacy initiative, *Just Read, Florida!* Although Florida was not the first state to pass such legislation, it has certainly been the most influential, with policymakers in many states citing Florida’s policy as a model when crafting their own legislation.<sup>14</sup> Many similar interventions have since appeared across states, including professional development and literacy coaching for teachers; the use of diagnostic and progress monitoring assessments to determine students’ reading abilities; parental notification if students are identified as having a “reading deficiency” under the policy; and a host of interventions for students, including but not limited to additional instructional time, small group or one-on-one supports, individualized reading plans, and summer programs.<sup>15</sup> Lastly, 19 states require retention for third-graders who fail to meet a predetermined cut score on their state’s standardized literacy assessment, and another nine allow for retention, leaving decisions up to the local level.<sup>16</sup>

### **III. Review of the Literature on Early Literacy Policies**

#### **Short-Term Positive Effects on Reading Achievement**

Research on third-grade literacy policies has found that they can be effective in improving students’ reading achievement in the short term.<sup>17</sup> However, other studies have shown that these effects dissipate over time and that retained students under these policies do not exhibit improved achievement and experience worse long-term educational and economic outcomes.<sup>18</sup> Further, despite the fact that almost every state has some type of early literacy policy, most of the research has been conducted on those policies (particularly Florida’s) that include a required retention component. Therefore, it is hard to generalize the results of these studies to other settings that do not have that retention component, such as Kentucky’s “Read to Succeed” Act.

Researchers have also explored third-grade literacy policies that include elements beyond retention, finding that these elements—not retention—may be driving the policy’s effectiveness. For instance, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) produced a report examining these policies, including case studies of both Florida and New York City, and concluded that “it is the less contentious aspects of these policies—early assessments to identify reading difficulties and the provision of ‘whatever-it-takes’ interventions for struggling students—that are the most effective drivers of achievement.”<sup>19</sup> Researchers have also explored the cumulative effect of retention, assignment to a high-quality teacher, and attendance in a summer reading program under Florida’s policy. They find that these interventions have a significant positive effect on reading achievement in the short term but are unable to separate the differential impact of these interventions.<sup>20</sup>

Further, much research has been conducted on literacy interventions and supports outside the context of a third-grade literacy policy. For instance, prior studies on interventions including increased time on literacy instruction<sup>21</sup> and small-group and one-on-one instruction<sup>22</sup> find positive effects on achievement. Research (including the ECS report described above) has also examined the efficacy of diagnostic assessments.<sup>23</sup> Research generally shows

that providing interventions based on the results of these tests can improve students' literacy skills.<sup>24</sup> Further, involving families in literacy interventions has been found to have positive effects on students' reading achievement gains.<sup>25</sup> Adding early literacy requirements for teacher certification may also be an effective way to improve reading achievement, as assignment to a high-quality teacher has been associated with higher student achievement.<sup>26</sup> Lastly, literacy coaching appears to be an effective mechanism by which to improve teachers' instruction and student test scores.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, new research out of Michigan—whose retention component has not yet gone into effect due to COVID-19-related disruptions—shows that K-3 ELA test scores have improved since the policy was passed in 2016 and that other components (e.g., literacy professional development for teachers, interventions for students) of the law have been in effect.<sup>28</sup>

However, it is important to note that not all third-grade literacy policies have found promising effects. For instance, following the implementation of North Carolina's Read to Achieve policy in 2012, there was essentially no effect on students' third-grade reading scores on the state's End-of-Grade assessment.<sup>29</sup> This policy, like similar policies in other states, aims to increase early reading achievement and includes multiple supports for students who are identified as being behind in reading (e.g., supplemental tutoring, option summer reading camps).

Notwithstanding, the research overall seems to suggest that early literacy policies may benefit student reading achievement as measured by state assessment scores, at least in the short term.

### **“Evidence-Based” Reading Goes Beyond Five Components**

One of the interventions that was proposed in Kentucky's “Read to Succeed” policy was “evidence-based reading instruction,” specifically in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These five components of reading, also included in 29 other states' early literacy policies<sup>30</sup>, are commonly known as the “Big Five” or “five pillars.” The Big Five can be traced back to a 2000 systematic literature review conducted by the National Reading Panel on the effects of various components of reading instruction on student achievement.<sup>31</sup> They found that, overall, phonemic awareness, systematic phonics instruction, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension instruction improved student literacy achievement. Though there have been numerous challenges to National Reading Panel report,<sup>32</sup> including warnings of misinterpretation from members of the panel itself, it has influenced states' choices of the components of reading instruction to include in early literacy policies.

The International Literacy Association (ILA) has defined “evidence-based reading instruction” as programs or instructional practices that have a record of success based on objective, valid, reliable, systematic, and refereed evidence.<sup>33</sup> The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) also offers a more nuanced view of reading, and Table 1 compares the Big Five to the instructional recommendations proposed by the ILA and NCTE. As illustrated in the table, the ILA and NCTE recommendations are more expansive than the Big Five and specify evidence-based instructional *practices* (not simply components of reading) that educators



can use in their classrooms. While these practices overlap with the Big Five, they clearly go beyond them. A special issue on the “science of reading” in *Reading Research Quarterly* similarly advocated an expanded understanding of evidence-based literacy, with the authors explaining that the narrow Big-Five-focused definition frequently incorporated into policy and practice is problematic.<sup>34</sup> Others have discussed the problematic nature of the narrow focus of “science of reading” and advocated for an emphasis on a broader range of skills and knowledge.<sup>35</sup> The 2025 proposed NAEP Reading Framework also includes an expanded definition of reading comprehension that goes beyond foundational skills and emphasizes that reading is a sociocultural process that involves language and knowledge and is shaped by home, community, and school experiences.<sup>36</sup> In short, many experts believe there is far more to literacy than the Big Five.

**Table 1. Recommendations for Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction**

“Big Five”	ILA <sup>37</sup>	NCTE <sup>38</sup>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Phonemic awareness</li> <li>2. Systematic phonics instruction</li> <li>3. Fluency</li> <li>4. Vocabulary</li> <li>5. Text comprehension instruction</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teach reading for authentic meaning-making literacy experiences for pleasure, to be informed, and to perform a task</li> <li>2. Use high-quality literature</li> <li>3. Integrate a comprehensive word study/phonics program into reading/writing instruction</li> <li>4. Use multiple texts that link and expand concepts</li> <li>5. Balance teacher- and student-led discussions</li> <li>6. Build a whole-class community that emphasizes importance concepts and builds background knowledge</li> <li>7. Work with students in small groups while other students read and write about what they have read</li> <li>8. Give students plenty of time to read in class</li> <li>9. Give students direct instruction in decoding and comprehension strategies that promote independent reading. Balance direct instruction, guided instruction, and independent learning</li> <li>10. Use a variety of assessment techniques to inform instruction</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Immerse students in a literate environment that includes environmental print and access to a wide range of genres and text types, including digital and multimodal texts</li> <li>2. Read to students regularly and purposefully, including a range of genres and text types</li> <li>3. Provide students with regular opportunities to read books (or other texts) of their own choosing for extended periods of time</li> <li>4. Utilize multiple instructional formats (shared reading, guided reading, literature discussion circles, individualized instruction) and regularly reflect on these teaching practices and student progress in order to meet the strengths and needs of students</li> <li>5. Help students build background knowledge of topics and language that enables students to understand what they read</li> <li>6. Provide opportunities for inquiry and language study, including vocabulary, word and text structures, and spelling patterns, that emerge from authentic reading experiences</li> <li>7. Model higher-order thinking skills, using techniques such as think-alouds, to illustrate the range of meaning-making strategies readers utilize in the process of reading including strategies (e.g., prediction, self-monitoring, reflection) they use before, during, and after engagement with meaningful texts</li> <li>8. Support reading fluency through strategies like repeated and assisted reading as well as the use of books featuring familiar topics, stories, and language</li> <li>9. Support students’ reading comprehension by providing regular opportunities for students to respond to reading through discussion, writing, art, drama, storytelling, music, and other creative experiences</li> <li>10. Expand students’ opportunities for learning and support learning to read a range of genres and text types by integrating reading and writing across the curriculum</li> </ol>

Further, not all research has shown positive effects of the Big Five.<sup>39</sup> Most significantly, a large-scale study of the Reading First program, which implemented these components, finds that while the program increased the amount of instructional time teachers spent on these components, it had mixed effects on reading achievement. It produced significant positive effects on decoding in first grade but no significant gains in reading comprehension across any grades.<sup>40</sup>

### **Challenging and Disparate Implementation**

Research has also revealed educator-related challenges with the implementation of third-grade literacy policies. For example, Nevada’s Reading First policy included teacher professional development, literacy coaches, student interventions, support from institutions of higher education, and coordinated efforts among schools, early literacy programs, libraries, and family literacy programs for 30 schools across the state. A qualitative study of this program found that literacy achievement improved but that the achievement gains were uneven and varied across schools. Those schools whose educators were willing to adapt their practices to implement the program and provide more instructional time in literacy experienced greater gains.<sup>41</sup> The researcher also discovered several implementation challenges, including integrating coaches, sustaining change in teachers’ practice, failing to involve educators in the design of the policy, and changing policies during implementation. In particular, teachers believed that the policy was forced upon them and that their expertise was devalued. There were also initial difficulties establishing collaborative relationships between teachers and coaches, many of whom had recently been in teaching roles themselves. Over time, Reading First schools became more collaborative, but educators had to overcome initial difficulties that stemmed from their lack of integration and buy-in to the policy.

Similarly, new research out of Michigan shows improvements in literacy achievement following the enactment of its “Read by Grade Three” Law but challenges with implementation, including a disconnect between policymakers and policy implementers, educators’ negative perceptions of the law, and resource constraints—particularly related to literacy coaching.<sup>42</sup> Other research has directly explored the simultaneous implementation of Reading First and Florida’s third-grade reading policy.<sup>43</sup> This research found that neither policy sufficiently supported teachers whose students were economically disadvantaged and low-achieving. This lack of support may point to equity concerns related to the implementation and efficacy of these policies for different subgroups of students.<sup>44</sup>

## **IV. Recent Developments**

Kentucky state legislators introduced the latest version of the “Read to Succeed” Act, KY HB 270, in January 2021, and its accompanying KY SB 115 in February 2021.<sup>45</sup> Though the bills failed to pass before the 2021 legislative session ended, they would have amended a number of Kentucky Revised Statutes related to reading instruction, supports, and interventions in order to establish a set of comprehensive actions to improve early literacy outcomes across the state. The “Read to Succeed” Act aimed to reverse downward trends in reading achievement in the early grades as measured by standardized tests.

To that end, the “Read to Succeed” Act outlined five comprehensive actions intended to improve outcomes for all students.<sup>46</sup>

1. Early intervention and instruction, including a multi-tiered system of support<sup>47</sup>; highly qualified educators; evidence-based reading instruction (specifically the Big Five components of reading); and collaboration with other service providers including the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood, Kentucky Educational Television, and the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives.
2. Reading improvement plans, including the implementation of universal screeners and diagnostic assessments to determine which students require such plans.
3. Family and community engagement and working to promote literacy in the home.
4. Teacher certification, with additional requirements that early childhood and elementary teacher preparation programs include evidence-based instructional programming and assessment processes and programs, as well as a requirement that candidates pass a reading instruction test before being granted their teaching license.
5. State professional learning support strategies, including statewide professional learning and support for K-3 teachers and media specialists, and literacy coaching for teachers in schools with the most need. It also would have repurposed the state’s Read to Succeed Council, which advises the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) on assessments and professional development, and the Collaborative Center for Literacy Development, which advises the Kentucky Board of Education on evidence-based reading instruction and collaborates with KDE on research evaluating reading programs and interventions.

## V. Discussion and Analysis

If it had passed the “Read to Succeed” Act, Kentucky would have joined a large group of states with similar policies. However, although the research on early literacy policies is limited, it offers important takeaways for policymakers to consider. The existing research indicates that third-grade literacy policies can be effective in improving literacy achievement, at least in the short term. However, these policies have limitations and implementing them as other states have done would not necessarily have improved early literacy in Kentucky—or in other states that may consider enacting such policies.

First, Kentucky’s proposed policy, like its counterparts in other states, emphasized five “evidence-based” components of early reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. However, as described above, research indicates that evidence-based literacy instruction extends beyond the Big Five, and that these components alone may not be as effective as policymakers believe them to be. The Big Five also do not provide clear guidance for how teachers should implement evidence-based literacy instruction in their classrooms, nor do they reflect the complexity and sociocultural nature of reading comprehension.

Third-grade literacy policies should make clear *how* teachers are to implement effective literacy instruction in their classrooms. Literacy experts have created sets of practices that policymakers could draw upon in developing early literacy policies. In Michigan, which has a third-grade literacy policy similar to that which was proposed in Kentucky, a group of early literacy experts created *The Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy: Grades K-3*, which includes 10 research-supported instructional practices that can positively impact literacy development.<sup>48</sup> The Essentials reflect the complex and situated nature of reading comprehension and provide practical recommendations for teachers for how to implement evidence-based literacy instruction in their classrooms. Though some have expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of these efforts,<sup>49</sup> new research shows that Michigan's K-3 literacy achievement has improved since its third-grade literacy policy was passed in 2016.<sup>50</sup>

Further, including a set of instructional practices such as these may also improve the preparation educators receive, as some early literacy policies require evidence-based literacy instruction to be taught in teacher preparation programs. It could also help standardize the professional development that coaches are providing to teachers under these policies, as coaches in part rely on state policy to determine how to support teachers' instruction.

Another element of Kentucky's proposed "Read to Succeed" Act was state professional learning support strategies, including literacy coaching and other professional development for K-3 teachers. As described above, students in schools whose educators were able to adapt their instruction in order to implement Nevada's Reading First policy experienced greater reading achievement gains.<sup>51</sup> One way to ensure that this happens is by providing the necessary funding to ensure that educators receive the necessary training to implement the policy. This need is highlighted by challenges with the implementation of Michigan's early literacy policy due to insufficient access to literacy coaches.<sup>52</sup> Early literacy expert Nell Duke recommends that state policymakers considering third-grade literacy policies include professional development that is strong both in process and content.<sup>53</sup> Professional development should include elements such as extensive workshops and coaching, as opposed to "one-day sit-and-get" sessions; and it should focus on practices informed by research such as those described above.<sup>54</sup>

The proposed "Read to Succeed" Act included literacy coaching for teachers in schools with the most need. However, research shows that including coaching is not enough by itself. Teachers have found it challenging to develop collaborative relationships with coaches and gain sufficient access to them,<sup>55</sup> and coaches who were recently teachers have struggled to establish themselves in the role of an instructional expert to their former peers. Policymakers may alleviate these concerns by supporting and funding literacy coach training, partnering with colleges of education to establish coach preparation programs which may provide more confidence and professional standing to newly certified coaches working with former peers.

Third, previous research has found that early literacy policies have been more successful when educators buy into the policy. For example, a failure to involve educators in the design of Nevada's Reading First policy was at the crux of several implementation challenges.<sup>56</sup> Educators felt as though their voices were left out of the policymaking process, and once the policy was passed, they felt their expertise had been devalued. They were asked to imple-

ment a policy to which they did not contribute. This led to differential effects of the policy, with schools whose teachers struggled to get on board experiencing lower student achievement than those whose teachers supported it and were able to implement it quickly. On the other hand, Indiana policymakers involved educators in creating assessments, professional development, and the state's new literacy framework as they developed and implemented their early literacy policy.<sup>57</sup> It will be important for policymakers considering similar policies to involve educators in these and other meaningful ways in order to establish buy-in for the policy.

## **VI. Recommendations**

The “Read to Succeed” Act ultimately did not pass during Kentucky’s 2021 legislative session. However, given that state legislators have introduced early literacy bills multiple times in recent years, it is likely that the state may see similar proposals in coming years. Further, given the rapid spread of these policies across states in recent decades, the considerations discussed here will be relevant to policymakers in other states interested in third-grade literacy legislation. Though many states have already enacted early literacy legislation, policymakers need not adhere to a one-size-fits-all approach to improving third-grade literacy achievement. State policymakers can learn from the research, described above, that has been conducted to this point about these policies. I offer three specific recommendations for policymakers to consider as they strive to ensure the efficacy of third-grade literacy policies moving forward:

- Instead of limiting the legislation to the “Big Five” components of reading, include a set of instructional best practices in literacy.
- Ensure initial, ongoing, and targeted professional development in literacy for K-3 teachers.
- Show educators that their expertise is valued by involving them in the development of the policy. This can be done by soliciting feedback through an open online comment period, conducting focus groups with a representative group of K-3 educators, and/or involving educators in the creation of various components of the policy.

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