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Understanding the Virginia Literacy Act

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UNDERSTANDING THE VIRGINIA LITERACY ACT

a MERC research and policy brief
This is a research and policy brief by the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC), a research–practice partnership between the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University and five school divisions in metropolitan Richmond: Chesterfield, Goochland, Hanover, Henrico, and Richmond Public Schools. Established in 1991, MERC conducts research studies on emerging and enduring issues in public education in partnership with its member school divisions. Its guiding principles are relationships, relevance, rigor, multiple perspectives, and impact.
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In the U.S., reading curriculum, instruction, policy, and research have had parallel and sometimes diverging paths. At the turn of the 21st century, a push for alignment via evidence-driven practice included national efforts, such as the 2000 National Reading Panel (NRP) Report, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and the 2002 Reading First Grant from the US Department of Education, that have launched significant changes in literacy policy.¹

State policy action, spurred by these and other milestones, has shifted curriculum, instructional and assessment practice. Early state efforts–some now a decade or more old–have rippled across other states more recently, accelerated by concerns raised by popular media accounts and reading achievement data. This has brought legislation intended to ensure that public school practice reflects what has become known as the “Science of Reading” or “SoR.”

The Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) is Virginia's legislative effort to codify research-informed practice, which took place in the 2022 and 2023 sessions of the General Assembly. The resulting bi-partisan legislation changed nine different statutes in the Code of Virginia, including major updates to four of the Standards of Quality, which are the foundational requirements for the Commonwealth's public schools and school divisions.

The purpose of this research and policy brief is to provide an overview of the VLA, including the reading achievement trends in Virginia that preceded its implementation, the policy implications of the VLA for Virginia school divisions, the research related to the Science of Reading that serves as the foundation for the legislation, and the approved core instructional programs associated with the VLA. It is not intended to serve as a critique nor an endorsement of the VLA, but rather to be a resource to school divisions as they prepare to fully implement the VLA in the fall semester of 2024. Note that the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) already provides a number of online resources related to the VLA for Virginia school divisions in anticipation for its enactment, some of which are further explored in this brief.

¹ Foster et al. (2024); Bush (nd)
WHAT ARE THE RECENT TRENDS IN READING ACHIEVEMENT IN VIRGINIA?

According to data from the Education Recovery Scorecard, Virginia students have declined an average of .69 grade levels in their reading scores between 2019 and 2023. In the MERC region, the decrease was an average of .75 grade levels, although the range in grade level equivalent drops was between .47 and 1.45, with most divisions showing a smaller decline than the state average. In the last year alone, average reading achievement in Virginia has declined by 9% of a grade level equivalent, and these declines have been most pronounced in high-poverty school contexts (similar to national trends). The following table depicts changes between the 2018-19 and 2022-2023 academic years in English achievement scores based on school-level data for all schools in Virginia from the Virginia Department of Education School Quality Profiles.

**Table 1. Changes in English achievement for Virginia schools 2019-2023**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Passing %</th>
<th>Change 2019-2023</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>76.1%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>67.0%</td>
<td>62.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilingual Learners⁴</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
<td>60.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>48.8%</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>66.4%</td>
<td>62.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>82.6%</td>
<td>78.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina/o/x⁵</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* indicates significant change at least at the p < .01 level

In 2019, an average of 76.1%⁶ of Virginia students passed their standardized tests in English, with economically disadvantaged (ED) students, multilingual learners (ML), students with disabilities, and Black students all passing at rates below the state average. Students with disabilities passed at a rate 27.3 percentage points lower than the overall average for

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⁰ Based on a standardized average of standardized test scores in each state analyzed by the Education Recovery Scorecard
³ n = 1,798 schools with complete data both years
⁴ Referred to as “English Learners” in VDOE data
⁵ Referred to as “Hispanic” students in VDOE data
⁶ This number, with about a quarter of students unable to pass a reading test, is one of the reasons the Science of Reading (SoR) has come to the forefront.
Virginia. **Compared to 2019, students were significantly less likely to pass their standardized tests in English in 2023, with the largest drops occurring for ML and Latina/o/x students.** However, all student groups were significantly more likely to show growth in their test scores in 2023 than they were in 2019. ED, ML, and Black students as well as students with disabilities were significantly less likely to show no proficiency or growth in 2023 than in 2019, while Latina/o/x and ML students were significantly more likely to do so. The following table depicts average scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in reading for 4th and 8th grade students in Virginia, along with US comparisons.

**Table 2. Changes in NAEP reading scores in US and VA 2019–2022**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>US 2019</th>
<th>US 2022</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>VA 2019</th>
<th>VA 2022</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similar to national trends, **Virginia students declined in their average NAEP reading scores in both the 4th and 8th grade between 2019 and 2022**. The 10 point drop in average reading scores for 4th grade students in Virginia was the worst in the country, with states that have enacted similar legislation to the VLA ranking 19th (Arkansas, -3 points) and 35th (North Carolina and Tennessee, -5 points) in their declines. In 8th grade NAEP reading score decline, Virginia students ranked 14th nationally, declining less (-2 points) than the national average (-3 points). States that have enacted similar legislation to the VLA were ranked 23rd (AR, -4 points) 32nd (TN, -5 points) and 44th (NC, -6 points). Overall, between 2019 and 2022, 30 US states and jurisdictions showed a score decrease in 4th grade scores, and 33 showed a decrease in 8th grade scores. There were no states that showed a score increase in the 4th grade, and only two states (Nevada and Hawaii) showed a score increase in the 8th grade.

These trends illustrate that there have been declines in reading achievement in Virginia relative to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2019–2020 academic year, which in many ways mirror national trends. However, it appears that 4th grade students in Virginia had a particularly pronounced decline in their NAEP reading scores. Concerns over achievement declines in reading have catalyzed policies like the VLA, along with similar policies in other states. The following section unpacks the policy implications of the VLA while offering comparisons to states that recently enacted literacy legislation.

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7 According to paired samples t-tests
8 NAEP scores range from 0-500 in reading. There is no uniform cutoff score for determining proficiency, but students are rated at the levels of “Basic,” “Proficient,” and “Advanced” based on their demonstrated mastery of specific content areas in the assessment.
9 It is important to note that only a small, randomly selected subset of students take the NAEP assessment each year. This should be kept in mind when making attributions based on these scores.
10 Ranked 52 out of 52 states and US territories with available scores
WHAT ARE THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE VLA FOR VIRGINIA SCHOOL DIVISIONS?

This section explores the policy implications of the Virginia Literacy Act, including how the VLA impacts state law for Virginia school divisions, how similar policies in other states compare to the VLA, what the expectations are for family involvement in the VLA, what can be learned from the implementation of these related policies in other states, and what reading achievement looks like in states with similar policies.

How does the VLA impact state law for school divisions?

Changes to § 22.1-1 define two foundational terms:

- **“Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction” (EBLI)** means structured instructional practices, including sequential, systematic, explicit, and cumulative teaching, that (i) are based on reliable, trustworthy, and valid evidence consistent with science-based reading research; (ii) are used in core or general instruction, supplemental instruction, intervention services, and intensive intervention services; (iii) have a demonstrated record of success in adequately increasing students' reading competency, vocabulary, oral language, and comprehension and in building mastery of the foundational reading skills of phonological and phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, phonics, spelling, and text reading fluency; and (iv) are able to be differentiated in order to meet the individual needs of students.

- **“Science-Based Reading Research” (SBRR)** means research that (i) applies rigorous, systematic, and objective observational or experimental procedures to obtain valid knowledge relevant to reading development, reading instruction, and reading and writing difficulties and (ii) explains how proficient reading and writing develop, why some children have difficulties developing key literacy skills, and how schools can best assess and instruct early literacy, including the use of evidence-based literacy instruction practices to promote reading and writing achievement.

Changes to Standard 1 of the Standards of Quality § 22.1-253.13:1 require each local school board to:

- have a program of literacy instruction aligned to a division-level literacy plan
- provide **reading intervention services in grades K-3** and a **literacy course in grades 6-8** for students with “substantial deficiencies” in reading based on their individual performance on the Standards of Learning reading assessment or a VDOE-approved early literacy screener
- provide **reading intervention services prior to promoting** a student from grade three to grade four.
Additionally, they require reading specialists and classroom teachers to serve students receiving reading intervention services by:

- developing, overseeing and monitoring a **student reading plan** using a VDOE-provided template
- **notifying parents and giving them the opportunity to participate** in the development of the student reading plan
- assessing students using the same **assessment at the end of that school year**

To meet these requirements, divisions may use funds appropriated for prevention, intervention, and remediation, summer school remediation, the at-risk add-on, or early intervention reading.

Changes to **Standard 2 of the Standards of Quality §22.1-253.13:2** require:

- a reading **specialist for each 550 students in K-3**
- training for each specialist “in science-based reading research and evidence-based literacy instruction practices”

Changes to **Standard 5 of the Standards of Quality § 22.1-253.13:5** require:

- **high-quality professional development** for:
  - Teachers endorsed in early/primary education preschool through grade three, elementary education preschool through grade six, special education general curriculum kindergarten through grade 12, special education deaf and hard of hearing preschool through grade 12, special education blindness/visual impairments preschool through grade 12, or English as a second language preschool through grade 12,
  - Reading specialists
  - Teachers endorsed in middle education grades six through eight who teach English, mathematics, science, or history and social science that builds an awareness of evidence-based literacy instruction and science-based reading research.
  - Middle school principals
- **technical assistance, including literacy coaching**, to local school divisions and a list of approved professional development programs at no cost to the teachers and reading specialists

Changes to **Standard 6 of the Standards of Quality § 22.1-253.13:6** require local school boards to have a literacy plan aligned to the division-wide comprehensive plan, using a template provided by VDOE, informed by Virginia Board of Education (VBOE) guidance.

Changes to **§ 22.1-298.1** require an assessment for teachers’ Initial licensure whether through traditional licensure programs or alternative routes and study in SBRR and EVLI for those in traditional licensure programs.
Changes to § 22.1-299.71 require VDOE to establish a microcredential program for teachers to get endorsed as reading specialists.

The following table depicts the supports from the VDOE required by the VLA, as well as their current status as of the drafting of this brief (April 2024).

**Table 3. Status of VDOE supports required by the VLA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VDOE Support Required</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop an approved list of evidence-based core literacy curricula, supplemental instruction practices and programs, and intervention programs</td>
<td>Approved the Core Instructional Program Guide in July 2023 and December 2023. Divisions must adopt an approved K-8 Core from this list by the start of the 2024-2025 school year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a template for student reading plans and division literacy plans</td>
<td>The student reading plans for all K-3 students identified as in need of intervention by the Virginia Language &amp; Literacy Screener (VALLS) screener will be implemented in the 2024-25 school year, and the VDOE has specified that “...the template for student reading plans corresponds with the data output of the VALLS screener.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop and implement a plan for annual collection and public reporting of division-level and school-level literacy data, at a time to be determined by the Superintendent, to include assessment results</td>
<td>Pending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide free online evidence-based literacy instruction resources that can be accessed by parents and local school boards to support student literacy development at home</td>
<td>Literacy Resources for Families and Communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide technical assistance, including literacy coaching, to local school divisions and a list of approved professional development programs at no cost to teachers and reading specialists</td>
<td>Division level teams - Literacy Implementation Network - Session 1 complete, Session 2 held throughout March Principals &amp; teachers - available Summer to Fall 2024</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How do similar policies in other states compare to the VLA?

To help partner school divisions understand potential challenges and opportunities with implementation of the VLA, we examined three states that have implemented policy changes ahead of Virginia: Arkansas (2017), Tennessee (2021) and North Carolina (2021). These states and Virginia share four key policy components in the enabling legislation: **Curriculum Adoption or Development, Pre-Service Coursework, Licensure Testing, and In-Service Professional Development**. They require:

- Teacher preparation programs to **change, or amend, curriculum** to ensure it is in line with evidence-based practices
- Successful completion of a **pedagogical reading exam** for teacher licensure or renewal
- **Professional development** in evidence based reading instruction or instructional coaching
- **Selection of aligned materials** for curriculum and intervention
- **Intervention plans for struggling readers**, to be implemented using specific instructional strategies

Differences among these four state laws include requirements or allowances for:

- the type of assessments that can be used to identify reading difficulties and measure progress (a policy provision in all but Arkansas)
- retention in 3rd grade if students are not meeting reading benchmarks for the grade level (all but Virginia include this policy, although reconsideration of the mandate is underway in Tennessee.)

What are the expectations for family involvement in the VLA?

The VLA addresses family involvement in two ways. First, every family is provided access to free online resources to support literacy development at home. Additionally, families will be able to participate in the development of individualized student reading plans if their child does not meet literacy benchmarks.

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11 Education Commission of the States. (2022)  
12 Schwartz, S. (2022, July 20)  
13 Note that the VALLS does not use benchmark scoring, but instead identifies children in one of three risk bands
• While the VDOE is in the process of preparing materials for families, those interested in offering support to children at home can utilize online materials available at the Family Resource Center page of the Virginia Literacy Partnership website. Materials address questions about literacy learning for students grades K-3 and provide updated information on the new VALLS, which will replace the PALS assessment.

• The VLA Implementation Playbook also includes a recommended Family Literacy Night Kit from Tennessee that can be used to increase family engagement with literacy learning activities.

• Districts are also responsible for addressing how they will build successful partnerships with parents, caregivers, school and communities in support of literacy development.

• Reading specialists are expected to work with teachers and families to monitor students' reading progress. They will coordinate and implement intervention for students not meeting literacy benchmarks. To support literacy development at home, families will be given access to free online resources for EBII.

What can be learned from implementation in other states?

• Arkansas was one of the earliest states to enact a literacy policy, and has amended the original law and enacted additional legislation over the last ten years, including amendments in 2019 and the LEARNS Act of 2023.
  ○ Relevance to Virginia: Stakeholders may suggest modifications to the VLA based on learning from initial implementation.

• Tennessee added pre-K students to its existing K-3 screening requirements in 2023, because early detection of struggling students can mitigate the need for retention or prolonged intervention.
  ○ Relevance to Virginia: Virginia school divisions may want to consider integrating VALLS pre-K screening already used in Virginia Preschool Initiative classrooms for all students entering Kindergarten.

• North Carolina requires all K-5 teachers to take over 160 hours of training on the “science of reading.” The mandatory course has been labeled by some as time-consuming and intense. Outside of standardized testing, alternative pathways, such as student reading portfolios, which North Carolina utilizes, may be a more equitable method of assessing literacy proficiency.
  ○ Relevance to Virginia: Utilizing stipends or other incentives for teacher literacy training could alleviate educator resistance to additional mandatory professional development.

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14 Fofaria, R. R. (2022, April 14)
15 Hanover Research. (2022)
16 One limitation of relying too heavily on standardized assessments is that it can be difficult to know why a student got an answer right or wrong.
17 Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury. Office of Research and Education Accountability (2022)
Beyond making policy that mandates changes in teacher preparation and development, curriculum, assessment, and intervention, these and other states have also leveraged time and resources to ensure that division, school, and classroom professionals are prepared to effectively implement the revisions to literacy instruction.

- Although its literacy legislation passed a year earlier than Virginia's, North Carolina is implementing it in the same year as Virginia. The additional year between policy change provided the opportunity for the [North Carolina Department of Public Instruction](#) to review district plans & facilitate regional and virtual professional development targeted to a variety of education professionals.  

- In 2021, Tennessee launched a new program called [Reading 360](#) which directed roughly $100 million in federal funding to provide literacy development resources and training.

**What does reading achievement look like in states with similar policies?**

The following figure depicts the average percentage of 4th and 8th grade students reaching proficiency in the NAEP reading assessment in 2019 and 2022 in Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee, states that have recently passed and/or enacted legislation similar to the VLA. Virginia scores are also included.

![Figure 1. Average 4th and 8th Grade NAEP reading score proficiency levels for AR, NC, TN, and VA](#)

Each of these states showed a decline between 2019 and 2022, with COVID-related school disruptions being a likely contributing factor. Over that time period, Arkansas showed a 2.5 percentage point decrease (the lowest of any of these four states), but they also had the lowest initial percentage of students reaching proficiency in 2019 at 30.5%. Virginia's

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18 [LIS Installation Timeline (2022)](#)  
19 [Tennessee Department of Education. (n.d.)](#)  
20 Note that the literacy legislation in AR was passed in 2013, whereas it was passed in 2021 in NC and TN and 2022 in Virginia.
decrease of 4.0 percentage points was less than North Carolina and Tennessee (both 5.5 percentage point decreases), but Virginia also had the highest percentage of proficient students of these states in 2019 at 35.5%. While these numbers do not indicate the impacts of literacy legislation on the reading scores of students in states where these policies have been enacted, they do offer a point of comparison in terms of achievement using a common metric.

**WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY ABOUT SCIENCE OF READING (SoR)?**

This section details the Science of Reading (SoR) research behind Evidence Based literacy instruction (EBLI) and Science-Based Reading Research (SBRR), including research related to brain science, phonological and phonemic awareness, and automated word recognition and fluency. It will then cover the main components of language comprehension, including building knowledge and vocabulary, language and text structures, and mental reasoning and strategy instruction.

**What is the SoR research behind EBLI and SBRR?**

A conceptualization of the Simple View of Reading (SVR) gave rise to The Science of Reading (SoR). Its foundation was developing a comprehensive model for understanding the function of decoding in reading comprehension and locating probable causes of reading impairments. The SoR, which emphasizes word reading and decoding in instruction and evaluation, swiftly evolved from the SVP paradigm.

- Dyslexia definitions and reading difficulties have changed the policy environment and sparked the Science of Reading Movement, which emphasizes brain-based learning combined with tactile or multimodal learning.
- The International Dyslexia Association defines Structured Literacy Practices as instructional practices that refer to the content and techniques or principles of education. As a result, the SoR has expanded to include these practices. The foundations of dyslexia policymaking are phonological awareness and phonics, which overlap with the Orton Gillingham approach, Structured Literacy, and the SoR.

**Brain Science**

Understanding how the brain functions when learning to read is important when considering early intervention and making sure that practices are implemented that align

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21 Cervetti et al. (2020)
22 Kirby (2020); Wyse & Bradbury (2022)
23 Douc (2020)
with cognitive processes. A general understanding of typical processing can also help educators design instruction for students with neurological differences. However, studying scientific findings about reading doesn’t automatically provide instructions for education. Science involves empirical findings and explanatory theories, while education focuses on activities that help real-world learning. Bridging these two realms is the purpose of translational research.

- Learning to read is not a natural process. The components needed for reading emerge in infancy and depend on genetic, medical, and environmental factors. Unlike spoken language, the brain does not have a specific mechanism for reading. Brain neuroimaging work shows that reading occurs in the brain regions important for language, vision, and executive function. Careful studies of both people and computer systems that read have led to the proposal of several important ideas about how reading works. One of these ideas is called the dual-route model. When a word is read, the information from the words on the page travels through the eyes to the visual cortex at the back of the brain. From there, two pathways are followed simultaneously.
  - One is a dorsal (phonographic) route involving the brain areas responsible for language, sounds, and movement (like sounding out each letter in "cat").
  - The second is the ventral (orthographic) route. This pathway goes through a specific part of the visual cortex called the fusiform cortex, which is specialized for recognizing visual patterns (like recognizing the word "cat").

When a person reads aloud, the brain processes the visual information in two ways – one involving language, sounds, and movement, and the other focusing on recognizing visual patterns. As readers become more proficient, they rely more on quickly recognizing whole words, but when just starting to learn, readers depend more on sounding out words letter by letter. Through practice and repetition, the connections between different parts of words in the brain become stronger.

**Phonological and Phonemic Awareness**

Phonological awareness is defined as the ability to recognize and manipulate spoken language’s smaller components. It involves recognizing speech sounds, syllables, and rhymes. Due to its close relationship with phonics, phonological awareness is crucial to early reading and spelling achievement. It evolves in distinct stages.

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24 Hutton et al. (2021)
25 Hutton et al. (2021)
26 Church (2023)
27 Dehaene (2010)
28 Church (2023); Church et al. (2023)
29 Ehri & Flugman (2018); Torgerson et al. (2019)
30 Moats (2019)
• **Initially, instruction focuses on word awareness**, attending to individual words within sentences. Students enjoy and recite rhyming or alliterative words and phrases during wordplay as they progress.

• **Subsequently, syllable awareness emerges**, involving activities such as counting and breaking words into syllables.

• **Following this, onset and rime (phonological units of a spoken syllable) manipulation become evident**, where understanding rhymes (words that sound alike) precedes producing them.\(^{31}\)

• **Lastly, phoneme awareness develops**, encompassing tasks such as identifying and matching sounds, segmenting and blending them within words, and ultimately manipulating phonemes through addition, removal, or substitution of sounds.

Phonological awareness activities include integrating concepts into songs, stories, and texts, fostering skills in identifying rhyme, initial/final sounds, onset/rime, consonants, and vowels through tasks such as matching pictures and words.\(^{32}\)

According to the International Dyslexia Association, phonemic awareness is crucial for early reading and spelling. It is the **conscious ability to recognize and consider individual phonemes within spoken words**, which grows gradually alongside learning about phonemes and letters in written words. **Phonics is the process of connecting speech sounds phonemes to letters or letter patterns like graphemes.**\(^{33}\)

• **Phonemic awareness involves consciously recognizing and thinking about individual speech sounds** (phonemes) within spoken words.

• **Phonemic awareness surpasses mere perception**, requiring learners to notice and reflect on phonemes as they hear and pronounce words.

• **Phonemic awareness can develop without written words**, highlighting the importance of practical, multisensory activities.\(^{34}\)

• After gaining phoneme awareness, **students must learn sound-symbol associations for reading and spelling**. This includes mappings from visual to auditory and auditory to visual, as well as breaking words down into individual sounds and blending sounds into words.

• Children should hear modeled examples of phonological skills before practicing themselves. They typically learn oral blending before segmentation, sometimes omitting phonemes initially. **Understanding phonemic awareness before grapheme-phoneme correspondences is best.**

• **Continuous phonemic awareness practice alongside phonics is vital**, starting with CVC words and including more complex examples. Engaging activities foster positive attitudes toward reading and writing, especially through multisensory approaches for younger or SEND children.

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\(^{31}\) Goswami & Mead (1992)  
\(^{32}\) Piasta & Hudson (2022)  
\(^{33}\) Piasta & Hudson (2022)  
\(^{34}\) Talbot (2020)
Automatic Word Recognition and Fluency

According to Kuhn and colleagues (2011), the bridge between the development of foundational skills (e.g., phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding) and the ultimate goal of reading comprehension is fluency which is the ability to read text with accuracy, speed and prosody/expression. Critical to fluent reading is automatic word recognition that combines accuracy and speed with unconscious effort. To develop automatic word recognition, readers need many opportunities to apply their foundational skills when reading and rereading connected text. By freeing up cognitive space by automatically recognizing words and reading fluently, readers are able to focus on understanding what they read.

What are the main components of language comprehension?

Language comprehension can be described as the dynamic, multi-component process of constructing meaning from spoken or written language. It involves integrating information about linguistic knowledge (e.g., syntax, semantics, genre, text structure), non-linguistic knowledge (e.g., content/world knowledge, vocabulary), and higher-thinking mental processes (e.g., inferencing, reasoning, strategicness) to extract meaning from a text. The complexity of language comprehension mirrors the multifaceted nature of its instruction. Fortunately, EBLI and SBRR offer valuable best practices to guide effective classroom teaching. This section will describe and define language comprehension using the different strands from the Reading Rope model—knowledge and vocabulary, language and text structures, and mental reasoning.

Building Knowledge and Vocabulary

Content knowledge includes the key concepts, principles, and vocabulary of core knowledge— the facts and ideas of cultural and world phenomena. Content knowledge instruction refers to the “intentional and explicit teaching of the core knowledge within a specific discipline.” This includes the content knowledge, world knowledge and experiences that a student already understands. The prior knowledge a student brings to a text before reading is critical to their comprehension.

- Students’ understanding of core knowledge heavily influences their reading comprehension. Even if students have sufficient decoding skills and strategically use comprehension strategies, if they do not know the concept, they will struggle to make meaning and inferences from what they are reading.
- Some researchers and media outlets have raised concerns that current reading instruction may overemphasize decoding and strategy instruction, potentially

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35 Scarborough (2001)
36 Duke & Cartwright (2021); Scarborough (2001)
37 Scarborough (2001)
38 Alonzo & Kim (2023, p. 1)
39 Cabell & Hwang (2020); Duke et al. (2021); Hwang & Duke (2020)
neglecting the importance of building core knowledge in young readers.\textsuperscript{40} EBLI and SBRR have established that young readers should receive language comprehension instruction embedded within core content knowledge instruction.

- Students' vocabulary knowledge is also strongly related to their reading comprehension. The importance of vocabulary to comprehension is widely documented in research.\textsuperscript{41} Vocabulary is associated with the number of words that a student knows and can be described in breadth and depth. Breadth refers to the number of words a reader knows, and depth refers to what the student knows about each word.

- Beginning in third grade, students need to learn about 3,000 words yearly.\textsuperscript{42} EBLI and SBRR have established frameworks for best practices in vocabulary instruction to ensure students are accomplishing this lofty word goal each year. Graves and colleagues (2014) provided an excellent overview of the various ways to select essential, valuable, accessible, and imported words for instruction. They also proposed a four-component framework for vocabulary instruction to increase vocabulary knowledge. This framework consists of the following components: (1) providing rich and varied language experiences, (2) teaching individual words, (3) teaching word-learning strategies, and (4) fostering word consciousness.

- Manyak and colleagues (2020) also highlight a multifaceted vocabulary approach that has been shown to get excellent results, including English language learners.

Language and Text Structures

In addition to having strong decoding skills and knowledge of text-specific vocabulary and concepts, students also need to develop a solid understanding of both sentence structure (referred to as language structure) and text structure. This deeper level of comprehension allows them to grasp the meaning and relationships within the text fully. Language structures, or how the sentences in the text are organized and structured, include phonology, morphology, semantics, and syntax. However, instruction on phonology and morphology are domains at the word level and, therefore, are highlighted in the word recognition strand of the Reading Rope model. Students need a deeper understanding of the language structures that pertain to the sentence level; semantics and syntax are highlighted in the comprehension strands and will be discussed in this section.

- A 2021 literature review by Duke and Cartwright on the progress of the Science of Reading in comprehension instruction underscores the importance of instruction focused on individual sentences. This includes analyzing the author's word choices and their meanings (semantics) as well as how the sentence is structured grammatically (e.g., adjectives, alliterations, etc.). Students must develop an understanding of how sentences are structured in what they are reading and why authors make these choices about structure (also referred to as Theory of Mind practices) to make accurate meaning from the text.

\textsuperscript{40} e.g. Hanford (2022); Wexler (2019)
\textsuperscript{41} Nagy & Townsend (2012)
\textsuperscript{42} Graves (2006)
• In combination with the organization of the individual sentences in a text, students also need to understand the overall organization of the text. Text structure refers to the way information is organized and sequenced within a text. Instruction typically explores the organizational patterns used in different genres. This includes analyzing how narrative texts are structured around character, setting, problem, plot, resolution, and theme.
• Similarly, students learn to identify organizational patterns in informational texts, such as description, sequence, problem/solution, cause/effect, and compare/contrast. Genres depend on the social purpose of a text, follow predictable stages, and influence the types of language structures in the text. Exposure to diverse genres and fostering discussions about their unique features can significantly enrich young readers' understanding of text structures.

Mental Reasoning and Strategy Instruction

Research has shown that students need to develop their mental reasoning skills to effectively utilize the knowledge they have about written language, as well as have a wide variety of strategies to help them organize their learning. The strand for mental reasoning skills and comprehension strategy instruction will be covered in this section.

• Hwang and colleagues (2023) highlighted the importance of making inferences to support comprehension. Building upon the Reading Rope model by Scarborough (2001), Duke and Cartwright (2021) proposed the Active View of Reading model. This model incorporates additional EBLI strands, reflecting the evolving understanding of the Science of Reading. The Active View model explains that several mental reasoning skills contribute directly to reading and should be modeled explicitly, including cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control, working memory, planning, and attentional control. It also focuses on motivation and engagement.
• The Active View also emphasizes comprehension strategy instruction that fosters students' abilities to use mental reasoning and inferencing skills. Comprehension strategies are “deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader’s efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of text.”
• Okkinga and colleagues’ (2018) study showed that teaching comprehension strategies improve reading, even in young students, in students with learning disabilities, and whole-class formats. The authors found evidence for strategies that included predicting, activating prior knowledge, setting a purpose for reading, self-quotations during reading, summarizing, inference, and self-monitoring.
• Wright and Cervetti (2016) highlighted the importance of teaching students flexible use of diverse strategies for comprehension rather than focusing solely on a single strategy at a time.

43 Hanson (2022)
44 Duke & Cartwright (2021, p. 30)
45 Duke & Cartwright (2021, p. 32)
With this research in mind about the Science of Reading as well as the main components of language comprehension that help to explain the key components of the Virginia Literacy Act, the following section explores the curricular components related to the VLA.

**WHAT CORE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS ARE APPROVED TO MEET THE VLA?**

The focus of the VLA legislation is bettering literacy outcomes in public schools, and an in-depth look at the bill demonstrates a focus on early literacy. School systems are required to choose curriculum from a predetermined list of instructional materials deemed as Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction (EBLI) and Science-Based Reading Research (SBRR) by the VDOE or submit an alternative program for VDOE approval. This review group of educators and literacy experts chosen by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to represent the varying regions and populations across the state together with the Virginia Literacy Partnerships (VLP) in the School of Education and Human Development at University of Virginia, participated in a two-phase review of potential instructional programs. As part of the program selection process, the VDOE created rubrics that were used to evaluate the high quality instructional material (HQIM) in the core instructional programs and make determinations about whether or not they met the criteria of being SBRR to provide EBLI. The foundation for these criteria were the five key components of literacy (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension and vocabulary) as outlined in the 2000 Report of the National Reading Panel.

The core literacy programs which met expectations were included in the VDOE's Approved Core Instructional Program Guide. Recommendations were only included after final approval from the Virginia Board of Education. Full implementation of one of the approved programs or a division-submitted alternative is required in the 2024-2025 school year. This section will discuss how the VDOE defines High-Quality-Instructional Material (HQIM), as well as an overview of the Core Literacy Programs selected for the VLA in its first two review phases.

**How does the VDOE define High-Quality Instructional Material (HQIM)?**

The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) released their 2024 State of the States report that examined the current landscape of teaching policies across the United States. The report titled, “Five Policy Actions to Strengthen Implementation of the Science of Reading” includes findings on current state-by-state comparisons of SoR policy trends, along with recommendations for state policymakers. In addition to recommending SoR alignment in university teacher preparation programs, the NCTQ report also urges states to “require districts to select high-quality reading curriculum” to improve learning outcomes for students. **Virginia was highlighted in the report because of the Virginia Literacy Act and because Virginia is one of only nine states that requires school districts**

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40 Emphasis added
to select high quality reading curriculum. Virginia was also highlighted for being one of only three states nationwide that allocates funds to all districts for the adoption of HQIM and requires the selection of an instructional program from a state list.

- In alignment with the NCTQ's instructional material recommendations, the VDOE is one of nine states requiring HQIM based on scientifically based reading research and evidence-based literacy instruction. The VLA states every school division will use an evidence-based literacy curriculum that is aligned with the SoR.
- In March, 2024, the VDOE released a document titled “Virginia Literacy Act: Implementation Playbook” that was designed to help ensure that SoR instruction was “accelerated through the adoption, purchase and implementation of high-quality instructional materials.” The VLA goes beyond just requiring HQIM but also ensures districts are supported (e.g. by the VDOE) in properly planning for the implementation of the core curriculum by utilizing the playbook as a “framework for decision-making.” The playbook asserts that Virginia teachers have relied on a mix of commercially available materials, homemade activities, and online sources like Pinterest or Teachers Pay Teachers to provide instructional materials which will be replaced with high quality core reading materials.
- Going forward, Virginia teachers will implement a high-quality core curriculum and exclusively use science-based instructional material. The implementation playbook defines high quality instructional material as “curriculum, or all of the instructional content that is used to teach students” and notes that, “the HQIM that have been approved for adoption by the Virginia Board of Education have been carefully designed based on science-based reading research and coherently built so that instructional content builds upon earlier foundations set both within and across grades.”

What are the approved core instructional programs?

The Approved Core Instructional Program Guide provides an overview of the 10 approved core instructional programs for grades K-5, K-2, and 4-5. For each program, the guide offers (a) an overall rating; (b) program strengths; and (c) program challenges. The company name, curriculum name, and edition year are listed as follows:48

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>Amplify Education, Core Knowledge Language Arts 2e (CKLA2; 2022)</td>
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47 Still, it is important that any instructional program deemed “high quality” be evidence-based.
48 Click on any curriculum name to jump to a longer description in Table 4
The remainder of this section will introduce the main similarities and differences amongst the approved core instructional programs.

- The VDOE partnered with the VLP to evaluated the core literacy programs and determined they each meet expectations for science-based practices across the key areas of literacy: phonological & phonemic awareness, phonics & word study, vocabulary, text reading & fluency, developing comprehension & background knowledge, small group instruction & independent practice, and writing.
- Each program's website gave considerable evidence as to how their instructional program aligned with EBLI and SBRR.
- Each program also emphasized content literacy instruction, also known as knowledge building instruction, which focuses on building knowledge alongside essential literacy skills.49
- Each program was also reviewed by a third-party review site. EdReports.org is a website run by an independent non-profit organizational review board with a mission to improve K-12 education by helping educators choose high-quality instructional materials.
  - The EdReport’s review board awarded the top rating of ”Fully Meets” science-based alignment to eight of the core literacy programs: CKLA2, Benchmark Advance, Into Reading Virginia, Imagine Learning EL Education, myView Literacy, Open Up EL Education, and Wonders.
  - Open Court Reading and Bookworms were rated as “Partially Meets” science-based alignment, and Superkids was not reviewed by EdReports.

The VDOE’s Approved Core Instructional Program Guide highlights each program’s unique strengths and challenges. A brief overview of key program variations is provided in the following table and comprehensive explanations can be found in the core instructional program guide.

Table 4. Approved Core Instructional Programs Under the VLA

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<tr>
<th>K-5 Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA2)</th>
<th>EdReports Rating: “Fully Meets”</th>
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Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA2) uses a knowledge building approach through the use of engaging units and rigorous texts that build background knowledge. The program’s explicit and systematic format integrates foundational skills, background

49 Kim et al. (2020)
knowledge, and comprehension. Its challenges include needing support in additional vocabulary instruction in the lower grades, additional phonics support in upper grades, and additional support for small group instruction. The program's website asserts that “CKLA has three times as many knowledge building components as any other program.” The website also shows that the program supports 4 of the 5 components of literacy (phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension), as well as writing. There are phonics materials, decodable, big books, student readers and trade books, poet and writer's journals and student activity books. In 2015, CKLA published a report, “Links to Research on Teaching and Learning” that cites the research that has been done that supports their core reading program.

### K-5 Benchmark Advance

**EdReports Rating: “Fully Meets”**

Benchmark Advance's strengths were posited as providing strong support for novice teachers, establishing connections between assessment data and instruction, and covering a wide range of knowledge building topics that repeat each year. The VDOE review group suggested that schools supplement this curriculum by adding additional materials for phonemic awareness in Kindergarten, and materials to strengthen vocabulary and high frequency word instruction in grades K-3. The Benchmark Advance website emphasizes that the research-validated materials have consistently indicated academic success with diverse learners by third-party efficacy studies.

### K-5 HMH Into Reading

**EdReports Rating: “Fully Meets”**

Strengths of the *HMH Into Reading* program include a strong scope and sequence of foundational skills, modules that are organized around themes and the integration of comprehension, writing instruction and background knowledge in instruction. Connected texts available in the program represent various cultures and support discussion among students. The VDOE review group suggested strengthening the materials by adding support for vocabulary including ample opportunities for application of new words through student practice. Instructional routines for fluency and small group instructional materials were also noted as areas for improvement by the review team. Divisions using *HMH Into Reading* are encouraged to aid their teachers as they analyze data obtained through students' assessment for grouping and instruction. The *Into Reading* website cautions educators to avoid adding multiple literacy programs to their instructional program, particularly easily accessible technology-delivered programs that may not align with instructional goals. Instead, they note the benefits of the coordinated core and supplemental print and web-based literacy materials available through *HMH Into Reading* that have been vetted to support student learning.

### K-5 Imagine Learning EL Education

**EdReports Rating: “Fully Meets”**

*Imagine Learning EL Education*’s strengths include an explicit and systematic curriculum with a strong phonics component in grades K-2, many resources for teachers to support whole and small group instruction, and specific instructional guidance. The program also
offers strong support for English Learners and provides high-quality diverse trade books. The VDOE review group concluded that challenges to the program include that it requires 3 hours for implementation in the lower grade levels and 2 hours for the upper grades, provides limited decodable texts per week, and expects most students in the upper grades to have mastered basic phonics skills. Additionally, teacher materials can be difficult to navigate with information being found in multiple documents.

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<tr>
<th>K-5 Open Court Reading</th>
<th>EdReports Rating: “Partially Meets”</th>
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<tr>
<td>The <em>Open Court Reading</em> program was marked as only “partially meeting” the science-based alignment expectations of the review team for EdReports, however the VDOE review group deemed that it “fully met” their science-based expectations. The VDOE review group highlighted the strengths of <em>Open Court Reading</em> as having an online portal for teaching materials that is well-organized and easy to use, enabling teachers to navigate and implement the curriculum effectively. It also has effective strategies for developing word recognition skills in lower grades, language skills in upper grades, and writing lessons on varying content-based topics for different writing purposes. However, the review group did note that there is limited guidance to help teachers make instructional decisions for whole group instruction, to differentiate for small group instruction, to support individual student needs, and to provide specific feedback to struggling students. Additionally, there are an insufficient amount of practice opportunities in foundational skills to develop automaticity, nor does the program provide novels for the upper grades to engage in novel studies.</td>
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<tr>
<th>K-5 Bookworms</th>
<th>EdReports Rating: “Partially Meets”</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Bookworms</em> was also marked as only “partially meeting” the science-based alignment expectations for EdReports, however the VDOE review group deemed it “fully met” their science-based expectations. Strengths of Bookworms, denoted by the review group, includes an easy-to-implement structure of a shared reading block, and a small group instruction block, as well as students working within the same text across multiple days allowing for deep conversation about the text and the opportunity to practice new concepts. The writing block also engages students in writing across multiple genres, including narrative, opinion, and nonfiction as well as writing in response to the text. This curriculum is not heavily scripted, which could entice veteran teachers but also require novice teachers to seek additional support. The review group also concluded that the program does not provide enough encoding practice nor does it supply decodable books. The program provides only a few complete sample small group foundational lessons and a generic lesson plan template</td>
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<tr>
<th>K-5 MyView</th>
<th>EdReports Rating: “Fully Meets”</th>
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<td>The final K-5 program meeting VDOE approval is <em>myView</em>. Just as the other six K-5 programs, <em>myView</em> is a comprehensive core literacy program that addresses a broad range of literacy skills and instructional practices that align with evidence-based literacy instruction, and provides HQIM to classroom teachers. The VDOE review group listed</td>
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myView's strengths as providing a comprehensive writing program for each grade level, assessment guides that present authentic classroom scenarios with detailed notes to assist in accommodating the needs of students, and a strong skills scope and sequence. The most challenging aspect of the program is its use of leveled text and running records, practices that are not aligned with VDOE expectations. The program also contains a large quantity of materials that may be time consuming or complex for teachers to navigate.

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<tr>
<th>K-2 Open Up EL Education</th>
<th>EdReports Rating: “Fully Meets”</th>
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Open Up EL Education is a core literacy program for Kindergarten through Grade 8, however the VDOE review group did not approve the program’s Grade 3 through Grade 8 materials. School systems may adopt Open Up Resources EL Education curriculum for grades K-2. As aforementioned, the VDOE also approved EL Education’s curriculum through the Imagine Learning company, and the differences between Imagine Learning’s version and Open Up Resources’ version are incremental. The VDOE’s Instructional Guide concluded that Open Up EL Education provides strong explicit and systematic phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. It provides small group instruction, independent student practice opportunities during small groups, and a strong sequence to build content knowledge and vocabulary. However, the program does not provide a sufficient amount of decodable texts meaning divisions would need to consider supplementing additional decodable texts. The program also requires three hours (one hour for Skills, one hour for Modules, and 1 hour for Labs) to implement the full program and school divisions would need to consider revising their schedule to fit this requirement.

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<tr>
<th>K-2 or 4–5 Wonders</th>
<th>EdReports Rating: “Fully Meets”</th>
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The Wonders program offers curricula and instructional materials for Kindergarten through Grade 5, however the VDOE review group did not approve the program’s Grade 3 materials because of phonics, fluency, and small group instruction criteria. School divisions may adopt the program for either Kindergarten through Grade 2, or for Grades 4 and 5. Wonders provides a strong development of comprehension, background knowledge, vocabulary, and multi-genre writing projects through thematic units. It also provides small group instruction that aligns with whole group instruction, and step-by-step guides and consistent routines for teachers. The VDOE review group warned that the program does include decodable texts but also uses leveled readers that are not in alignment with the phonics scope and sequence. It also warns that teachers would need to decide what materials and resources to include and what to leave out because the program includes more than can be accomplished in a single school year.
The Superkids Reading Program was crafted especially for students in Kindergarten through Grade 2 and was approved by the VDOE review group, but was not reviewed by the EdReports review board. The VDOE review board concluded that Superkids provides decodable texts and read alouds that expose students to vocabulary and content knowledge, provides differentiated instruction during whole group lessons, and includes a detailed lesson plan for each day of instruction. However, the program lacks a sufficient amount of data-driven assessments, includes leveled readers which are not aligned with evidence-based literacy instruction and are not recommended, and contains a large amount of materials that may be time consuming for teachers to navigate.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Because literacy research is continuously updated, the VLA should be as well

The research literature reviewed in this brief provided an overview of the key elements of the Science of Reading (including brain science and phonological and phonemic awareness), automatic word recognition and fluency, building knowledge and vocabulary, language and text structures, and mental reasoning and strategy instruction. Each of these help illuminate the complexities behind how children learn how to read, and each has been researched for decades. As new findings emerge in these fields, it will be important for policymakers to stay abreast of the changes and update the VLA legislation, including the adoption of new, evidence-based instructional programs as needed.

2. Trend data from Virginia (as in similar states) may not reflect impacts of the VLA

State level achievement data related to reading in Virginia in the years following implementation of the VLA may not offer direct evidence of the impacts of the legislation on the learning outcomes of students. This is because there are other factors that could contribute to changes, including gaining additional distance from the negative learning impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in school staffing across the state, and varying degrees of teaching quality (among others). Comparative data between Virginia and states that have similar literacy legislation offers a clear example of how states with existing policies may still perform similarly with states where such policies have yet to be fully implemented. Any state-level trend data reported after VLA implementation needs to include clear guidance on how to interpret the outcomes, as well as acknowledgement of the other factors that may have made an impact on student literacy in Virginia. To more clearly capture the impacts of the VLA, it will be important to engage in primary data collection (e.g. surveys and interviews) to understand how key
stakeholders (e.g. teachers, students, and parents) perceive its impacts in order to triangulate achievement data.

3 Additional staffing may be necessary to fully execute the VLA

With the requirements within the VLA for individualized reading plans for every student who is not meeting grade-level requirements and including families in the process, one reading specialist per 550 K-3 students may not be sufficient, especially in schools with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students and/or multilingual learners. Divisions should make decisions about the number of reading specialists they hire based on evidence-based strategies for supporting students in school contexts where reading achievement has historically been lower (e.g. high-poverty schools) to ensure fidelity to the requirements. This may be difficult for school divisions to support entirely through local funding, and therefore additional resources from the state may be necessary.

4 Teachers will need high-quality, ongoing professional development

The approved instructional programs have corresponding materials for teachers to use to inform their practice, but the amount of information can be overwhelming without accompanying professional learning that emphasizes key strategies for implementation. Divisions will need to provide ongoing professional development for teachers in using the core instructional programs and guide them as to what is essential for all students and what is more effective for small-group instruction. Additionally, much of the work involved in effective implementation of the VLA may fall on elementary teachers given the focus on early intervention. Because of this, they may not only need targeted professional development, but also more time in their schedules (e.g. planning periods) to help their students develop literacy skills under this updated approach. This additional load on teachers may contribute to burnout, and therefore offering relevant professional development and time for implementation is not only important for successful program implementation, but also teacher retention.

5 Virginia school divisions will need time, resources, and support

Given the significant changes underway, Virginia school divisions will need significant time, support, and resources to implement the provisions of the VLA and effectively shift their practices in supporting student literacy. The core instructional programs that were approved by the VDOE are extensive and complex instructional guides that include numerous resources and materials. The programs leverage content literacy, also known as knowledge building literacy, and employ science-based practices. Independent research demonstrates the programs’ effectiveness in significantly improving student reading outcomes. However, they may represent a substantial departure from current instructional practices, potentially requiring large adjustments for teachers. Educators will
need ample time to thoroughly understand and become comfortable with the program's structure. School divisions must also consider the dramatic shift in instruction that the VLA could potentially cause and give their schools enough time to acclimate to this change before concluding ineffectiveness of the program changes. Collaboration and shared expectations will be key. In particular, state, school, and division leaders should help ensure public understanding that immediate shifts in assessment outcomes may not be likely.

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REFERENCES


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