

CASE STUDY

Life-Changing Legislation in North Carolina Leads to Statewide Literacy Success





“

Reading is so fundamental to a child’s academic and career success. To have their future in play because of something as basic as how students learn to read is not acceptable. So, we’re changing that.”

- Catherine Truitt, Former North Carolina State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Like most states in 2021, North Carolina’s literacy landscape was stagnant, with too many students unable to read proficiently. But without an understanding of the science of reading, many educators were sticking with the approaches they were taught to use in their educator-prep programs: A “whole language” or “balanced literacy” approach.

Catherine Truitt, an early proponent of the science of reading, had long felt sweeping changes were needed in literacy education. The decades of research that made up the science of reading resulted in informed, instructional approaches that are effective and evidence-based—making literacy accessible to every student.

How It Began: From Literacy Landscape to Legislation

In her role at the University of North Carolina System Office, Truitt contributed to an extensive study of statewide educator–prep programs to better understand how teachers were being trained to teach reading. The 2017 study revealed that not only was the science of reading not consistently taught to pre-service teachers, but they were also not learning to align instruction to state standards.

“These are well-intentioned people who are not experts in the science of reading or in literacy ... trying to do good work,” Truitt said. “But even in a local-control state, there has to be someone who is championing fidelity to the science of reading.”

In November 2020, Truitt was elected as the North Carolina state superintendent of public instruction. She was motivated to run so she could have a more direct role in helping state district leaders shift to the science of reading. “I knew what our literacy looked like in fourth and eighth grades, and I knew that was unacceptable,” Truitt said. “Before the pandemic, only 14% of African American eighth-graders were starting ninth grade reading proficiently. That’s why this was part of my platform.”

With champions like Truitt leading the charge, the state legislature took an interest in educator–prep programs, around the time the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction identified early literacy as a critical strategy for raising the overall quality of education in the state.

Truitt helped shape the [Excellent Public Schools Act](#), passed in April 2021, which established statewide reading standards and funded professional development for pre-K through fifth grade teachers based on instruction aligned to the science of reading. It also ensured leaders of educator-preparation programs would be held accountable for this shift to teaching pre-service teachers to use a phonics-based approach to early literacy instruction—a key component of the science of reading.

“Although that legislation was vetoed initially, eventually it passed,” Truitt said. “And it was truly a case of the legislature, the Department of Public Instruction, the state board, and the governor’s office all rowing in the same direction to implement this legislation.”

Implementing Statewide Professional Development

After watching the transformational impact of a statewide Lexia® LETRS® (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) rollout in Mississippi, North Carolina lawmakers chose LETRS as the literacy professional development solution for the state as well.

But how do you roll out professional development to 44,000 educators without teachers thinking of it as “just one more thing?”

Moving an entire state educational system into one consistent literacy approach is a huge undertaking in the best of times. But Truitt’s team implemented strategies that helped ensure a smooth rollout, including:

- 1 Creating a statewide communications plan.** This plan ensured teachers and district leaders were aware and kept up to date with all of the important details and expectations around professional development before and during the rollout.
- 2 Dividing their 44,000 educators into three cohorts.** By staggering the start dates of three separate cohorts, a “coalition of the willing” was created by asking for district leaders to volunteer to sign up to be first. With 11,000 participants in the first cohort, positive results started to become known to those in the second and third cohorts through word of mouth, which was an effective way to get buy-in from teachers across the board.
- 3 Keeping building administrators looped into the entire process.** State leaders prioritized that at least one administrator in each K–5 building participate in the professional development training, which tied the administration to all communications, helping to establish a broader understanding of the science of reading and the extensive teacher training process.

By summer 2024, **all 44,000 educators had successfully completed their required professional development**—and the positive outcomes have been rolling in since the first cohort began in 2021.

What about new and incoming teachers?

New teachers who are fresh out of their educator–prep programs or teachers who come from other states receive LETRS professional development during their first year of teaching.

The new teacher training is managed by an Early Literacy Specialist (ELS) assigned to each district. The state’s 115 ELSs are tasked with ensuring fidelity to the Excellent Public Schools Act, and are directly employed by the State Education Authority, which Truitt said is part of their “secret sauce.”



Positive Reactions to LETRS in the Early Months

“Research studies show that most professional development lacks substantial value, and teachers can spot the real deal a mile away,” Truitt said. “LETRS is the real deal.”

Out of the gate, participants in the first cohort began to see student data shift in a positive direction—even before completing their professional development training. Within six months, they were seeing more K–3 students who were ready for core instruction. Across the state, students were pulling ahead when their teachers were trained in LETRS. “The data showed that students of teachers in the first cohort were outperforming the classrooms of teachers who hadn’t started yet,” Truitt said.

This aided in the ability to recruit and retain good teachers. “When teachers feel successful, they’re more likely to stay in the profession,” Truitt said. “When I was a high school English teacher, it was incredibly frustrating that one-third or more of my class wasn’t proficient enough to read selected texts in American Literature. But high-quality professional development is something I always wanted as a teacher and didn’t get. What could be more detrimental to wanting to stay in your profession than watching your students struggle year after year?”

The newest generation of teachers is asking for more mentorship in their jobs and more opportunities to learn than any previous generation, Truitt said. So, this professional development opportunity provided a real boost in teacher morale; they knew they were making a meaningful difference in students’ lives. Their success was contagious.

“Teachers thank us all the time, including veteran teachers,” Truitt said. “For all those years, they were doing something that didn’t comport with what the science said—and now they’re grateful to be on track.”

“

This professional development is very high quality. Even before completing the two-year LETRS course, teachers would start to see their data shift. We saw that at a state level. Kids were performing better.”

– Catherine Truitt, Former North Carolina State Superintendent of Public Instruction



Lexia LETRS Support



We have been incredibly happy with the level of guidance and support that Lexia® has offered from day one. As a vendor partner—that regular communication, being flexible, being good listeners, allowing us to share feedback from our district stakeholders (who are implementing this in the trenches)—that is really important.

Lexia needs to be given the credit they've earned for being such a good partner and helping us support the mission and vision for improving literacy outcomes."

– Catherine Truitt, Former North Carolina State Superintendent of Public Instruction



Overcoming Resistance

Implementing the state-mandated professional development was a heavy lift in the beginning, Truitt said. Some teachers and superintendents asked to pause early on because they were still juggling post-pandemic concerns. But quoting "If not us, who? If not now, when?" Amy Rhyne, senior director of the Department of Public Instruction's Office of Early Learning, said, "It didn't take long for those in the first cohort to see success in the data and for that to be contagious for others."

Truitt shared how they continued to get buy-in for the second and third cohorts. "We made a conscious effort to use social media as well as state board of education meetings to highlight early wins by district or by school," Truitt said. "We celebrated milestones; we made videos; we visited classrooms that were doing well, and we lifted that up every opportunity we could."

North Carolina Students Outperforming the National Average

From the first six months on, the data is clear—science of reading-based instruction makes a difference in student outcomes. “Educators in North Carolina are changing the trajectory of students’ lives,” Truitt said.

“They call it the ‘science’ of reading because, like any scientific concept, these methods are grounded in research and data. When we implemented LETRS, we knew we’d see results,” Truitt said in a recent press release. “But to have so many students improve this early in our state’s new literacy journey is a wonderful surprise.”

Truitt is optimistic about the implications for the overall state of education for North Carolina’s students in the future. Here’s some promising data about the impact so far:

2021–2022

- First cohort of teachers started LETRS
- Within six months:
 - The number of K–3 students ready for core instruction increased
 - Students with teachers in the first cohort were outperforming others

2022–2023

- The second and third cohorts started, with all educators set to complete LETRS by summer 2024
- Percentage of students “on track” (for core instruction, no interventions needed)
 - More than doubled in kindergarten (**surpassing the national average**)
 - Increased by 22% in first grade
 - Increased by 13% in second grade
- By the end of the year:
 - Kindergarten students at risk of requiring intervention fell from 53% to 15%
 - All of the subgroups reported for North Carolina—White, Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native American/Alaskan native—outpaced their comparison subgroups using DIBELS® 8
- By the end of the school year, 29 districts completed LETRS, including nearly 10,000 (K–5) educators, 870 (pre-K) educators, and more than 500 administrators.

2023–2024

- The second cohort of LETRS concluded, bringing the total to 52 school districts. The final cohort ended in the spring.
- Nearly 10,000 additional students were considered proficient in reading by the end of third grade compared to 2021–2022.
- Scores steadily rose for all subgroups
 - “But there is still work to do,” Rhyne said.
- Percentage of students on track:
 - Kindergarten students increased by 40% (vs. 25% nationally)
 - First grade students grew from 52% to 71%
 - Second grade students saw an 11% increase
 - Among subgroups:
 - Black students saw a 16% increase since the beginning of last year (6% above national average)
 - Hispanic (17% gain)
 - American Indian (21% gain)
 - ALL higher than the national average
- By the end of the school year:
 - The number of students who met or exceeded the benchmark for the DIBELS 8 assessment grew by 81,616
 - 53,808 fewer students scored well below benchmark
- Since the start of North Carolina’s LETRS journey:
 - 20,000 **less** students are at risk of needing intervention
 - 34,000 **more** students are at or above benchmark

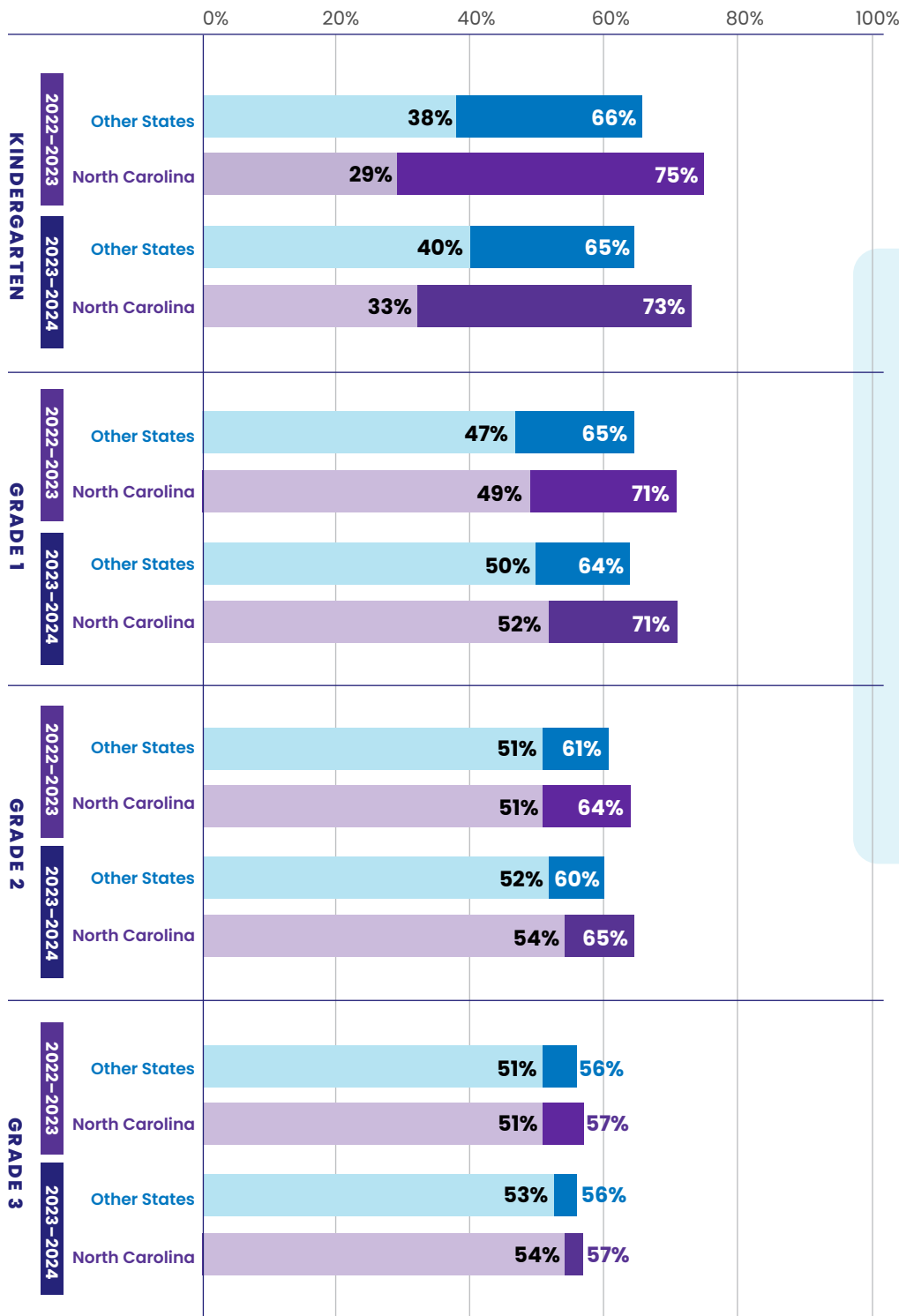
**All data is from the same assessment: DIBELS 8 (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) used by 2.5 million students across 50 states.*

This is the third year that K–3 students outperformed the national average—and the results keep improving year over year.

North Carolina K–3 Early Literacy Assessment Results vs. Students in Other States, 2022–2024

Beginning of Year (BOY) and End of Year (EOY)

Percentage of students scoring at/above benchmark



Year after year, students in North Carolina are outperforming students in other states, scoring at or above benchmark on the DIBELS 8 assessment, at every grade level K–3.

The most impressive growth can be seen in North Carolina’s kindergarten students, where the percentage of students who are on track in reading more than doubled in both the 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 school years.

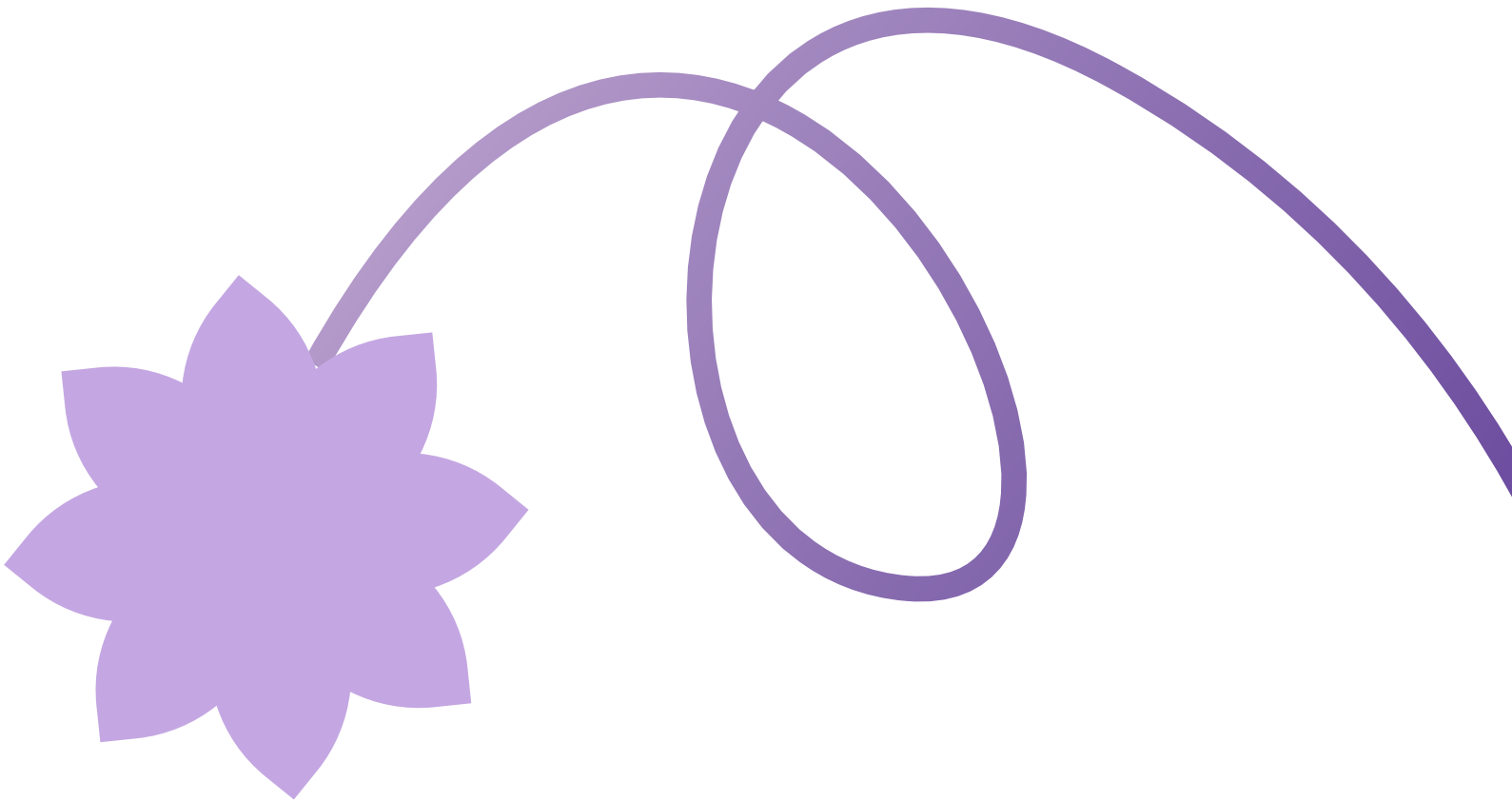
Looking Ahead

Going into the 2024–2025 school year, this is the first full year students are working with teachers who are completely trained in LETRS, and Truitt and her team expect student outcomes will continue to improve over previous years' growth.

"Reading is foundational to everything, and so it's critical that students are actually reading proficiently before third grade," Truitt said.



Truitt and her educators also believe achievement levels will be even more impressive in the years to come, as students who worked with LETRS-trained teachers since kindergarten continue to work their way up the grades.

Asked how she'd advise others about implementing a statewide professional development rollout on a similar scale, Truitt said, "My best practices for a successful rollout include operating in a bipartisan way with everyone rowing in the same direction, doing what's right for kids, being bold, and tuning out the noise. **Your leadership matters.**"





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