



**Testimony Before the United States House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor,
Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies**

“Supporting the Science of Reading”

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Thank you, Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, and members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee, for the opportunity to speak at today’s hearing regarding the science of reading. My name is Larry Saulsberry, Jr., and I currently serve as the Director of Teaching and Learning for K-12 Literacy within Huntsville City Schools of Huntsville, Alabama.

Lived Experience

In 2022, I enrolled in my first science of reading course, Lexia Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) with a Principal’s Primer. It was a one-year course that undoubtedly opened my eyes to the possibilities of what could be as I became more intentional in learning alongside teachers who were enrolled in LETRS for Elementary Educators and also leading all teachers under my leadership in the process of teaching students how to read. At that time, a financial incentive of five hundred dollars (funded by my local education agency, Limestone County Schools) was allocated for course completers of LETRS with a Principal’s Primer. Upon engaging in the coursework, I reflected on the gaps in foundational reading skills among some of the students that I was leading and even some of my former students. In addition, I was leading a school that had been designated as Limited Support 2 (LS2) by the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) requiring quarterly one-on-one coaching sessions facilitated by the ARI Regional Literacy Leadership Specialists coupled with the “Strong Leaders, Strong Readers” quarterly sessions facilitated by ARI and the Office of School Improvement of the Alabama State

Department of Education (ALSDE). Through our collaboration, we identified and analyzed trends and achievement gaps in our data and determined better learning outcomes for students. Also, our school had been designated as an Additional Targeted and Support Improvement (ATSI) School under the Every Student Succeeds Act due to the performance of one of our subgroups. At that time, I became inspired to take a deeper dive into the vast range of available instructional/intervention resources within the platforms that we were utilizing as they had primarily been used to assess students for benchmark performance.

In my current role in HCS, an important component of the work to advance literacy involves constantly assessing our programs and resources to determine if they lead to mastery of the Alabama Course of Study content area standards and essential skills. Ultimately, it also involves measuring students' abilities and readiness for both language and reading comprehension as we apply the science of reading approach; for instance, it is a reality that oftentimes, students who grapple with phonological awareness will most likely have limited vocabulary and encounter challenges with grammar and language structures and semantics, etc. How should schools and districts continually address this? One approach is through ensuring that teachers have increased awareness of the five pillars of literacy, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Montgomery et al., 2013). Another approach is by engaging teachers in coaching (full and mini cycles) and professional development sessions implemented at minimum by the local reading specialists within their schools.

Furthermore, while growing up in the community of Gee's Bend located in Wilcox County, Alabama, I learned the value of literacy. My parents and my deceased maternal grandmother, Deborah Pettway Young (a Gee's Bend quilter), ensured that I found enjoyment in reading. I now make it a goal to make certain that my three sons do as well as two of them will

be preparing to meet the requirements of the Alabama Literacy Act soon. Undoubtedly, all students should be empowered to have an interest in reading.

A Look at the Data

During Spring 2025, 88% of Alabama's third graders were reading on or above grade level as measured by the Alabama Comprehensive Assessment Program (ACAP) Summative Reading Subtest, which is required by the ALSDE for third graders to be promoted to fourth grade. Only 32% (forty-eight) of Alabama's school districts (149 total) scored below the state average. However, what is being done about the 12% of third graders who were not reading on or above grade level? (Griesbach, 2025) There is work that is happening across the state to close reading gaps by continuing the implementation of Student Reading Improvement Plans (SRIPs) beyond grade three. For example, HCS serves nearly 24,000 students of which about 3,600 are fourth and fifth graders; several have SRIPs that have continued. Thus, funding support is needed to ensure access to high-quality instruction, resources, and interventionists for Alabama's fourth and fifth graders to experience increased reading proficiency before promotion to middle school.

Access to Professional Learning

Reflecting back to when I was an elementary principal, I recall one of my teachers seeking enrollment in Orton-Gillingham (OG) training. Unfortunately, I had not explored that method as a former English language arts teacher, former instructional coach, and not even as a school administrator. My wondering was that if this method had been successful in the early to mid-twentieth century, why would we have evolved from its application ("What is the Orton-Gillingham Approach?" n.d.). Simultaneously, that same teacher immediately shared how impactful the *Sold a Story* podcast had been in her approach to teaching reading, and upon listening to the episodes myself, I echoed her sentiments. The podcast challenged my thinking as

to how methods of teaching reading had evolved over the years to the present and further grounded the importance of the science of reading approach.

In October 2025, I had the opportunity to attend the 9th Annual Conference of the Reading League in Chicago, Illinois. It was evident that the work of researchers like Dr. Anita Archer and Dr. Julie Washington is assuredly helping to change the landscape of teaching and learning through the science of reading. That fundamental question remains of how to encourage all states to embrace the need for stronger science of reading policies that challenge former ineffective methods of how to teach reading. As a state, Alabama educators are committed to improving reading performance on the ACAP Summative and the National Assessment of Educational Progress. As Dr. Clarence Sutton, Jr., the superintendent of HCS, would say, “From Vision to Victory: Every Department. Every School. Every Student.” In our district, we have realized the power of coming together to move the needle towards increased literacy.

The Value of Partnerships

Currently, in HCS, there is a strong partnership with The Schools Foundation in which first grade teachers primarily are invited to engage in a five day experience to become OG trained. The district works to ensure that costs for substitute teachers of those attending OG sessions are not incurred by the individual schools. Upon receiving training, teachers leave with a newfound sense of awareness and confidence to instruct their students. In addition, the HCS Dyslexia Coordinator, along with a kindergarten teacher at Hampton Cove Elementary School, recently became Certified Academic Language Therapists through the Academic Language Therapy Association. Moreover, there are twenty-six local reading specialist positions for all elementary schools funded by ARI and eight reading interventionist positions, which are also funded by ARI; in addition, HCS locally funds literacy specialists at several schools.

As Dr. John C. Maxwell asserts, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.” Furthermore, the partnership with Lexia to provide professional development on the science of reading remains strong as there are currently three cohorts of sixty-three total HCS participants enrolled in the LETRS for Administrators course, which includes principals, assistant principals, local reading specialists, and district-level employees. Both year one and year two participants are engaged in coursework centered on concepts such as the five literacy pillars, Gough and Tunmer’s Simple View of Reading, Scarborough’s Reading Rope, and Ehri’s Phases of Word-Reading Development, etc. (Lexia Learning, 2022). Online modules are completed, along with assigned readings in a printed course manual. Principals, assistant principals, and any participants with Professional Leadership Certificates earn Professional Learning Units and Alabama Principal Leadership Development System clock hours towards meeting stipend-earning requirements of the School Principal Leadership and Mentoring Act, which was passed in 2023 (Alabama Legislature, 2023). Local reading specialists and non-administrators are able to earn Continuing Education Units. This is evidence that when leaders have the knowledge that they need, they can then become partners in the journey to reading proficiency.

Moreover, while teachers are also encouraged to enroll in LETRS for Elementary Educators and LETRS for Early Childhood Educators, a barrier to encouraging full participation and commitment from all teachers in the primary grades have included the dissolution of the one-time \$1,000 stipend that was once provided by the ALSDE. However, to counteract that, districts can promote support through the process by developing cohorts (up to twenty-five participants) of which some sessions are offered in-person, along with the completion of online course modules. The costs of substitute teachers for those enrolled in the LETRS courses within HCS are covered by the district as well. Funding support for teacher stipends and substitute

teacher costs is needed to increase participation in the LETRS courses especially as there is a need for fourth and fifth grade teachers to be trained in the science of reading.

In conclusion, one of the greatest gifts that we can give a student is the gift of reading, not just reading but proficient reading. Through knowledge, educators' abilities to close reading achievement gaps can be increased as they work to see the connections between language and reading comprehension. With support to ensure access to professional development, personnel, and resources, there is hope that greater reading proficiency levels can and will be achieved. Thank you again for this opportunity. Please share any questions that you may have.

References

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