

Testimony of Bonnie Short

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Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to share Alabama's experience strengthening early literacy through evidence-based policy and sustained implementation.

My name is Bonnie Short, and I serve as Director of the Alabama Reading Initiative at the Alabama State Department of Education. The Alabama Reading Initiative is a statewide effort focused on strengthening literacy instruction so that all students develop the foundational skills necessary to meet or exceed grade-level standards.

Alabama's experience demonstrates that meaningful literacy improvement does not come from isolated programs or short-term initiatives. Instead, it results from coherent policy paired with long-term, job-embedded implementation supports that help educators deliver strong instruction, identify risk early, and respond quickly when students need additional support. It is successful with the combined commitment of the State Superintendent, Legislature, and a Governor who all make literacy a priority, as well as the support for and involvement of the local schools.

In 2019, Alabama enacted the Alabama Literacy Act to ensure that students read at or above grade level by the end of third grade. The law prioritizes prevention through strong core instruction, early and frequent screening, and timely, evidence-based intervention. Independent policy analyses have described Alabama's approach as comprehensive, noting that the state adopted a full set of early literacy policy components designed to function together as a coordinated system.

Implementation at scale has been central to this work. First, Alabama has focused on strengthening Tier 1 literacy instruction in every classroom. Through the Alabama Reading Initiative, schools receive support in delivering explicit, evidence-based instruction that builds foundational reading skills and connects them to language development and comprehension.

Second, Alabama has invested in building educator knowledge through sustained professional learning. Effective professional learning extends beyond one-time training and is reinforced through ongoing, job-embedded support that helps educators translate research into daily instructional practice.

Third, assessment is used coherently and purposefully. Alabama provides universal screening and early literacy assessment resources to help schools identify students at risk and monitor progress over time. Just as important, the state emphasizes clear, family-facing communication so that parents understand what assessment results mean and how schools will respond to student needs.

Fourth, when students require additional support, schools are equipped to respond quickly. The Alabama Reading Initiative provides guidance and tools aligned with the Literacy Act to support tiered instruction and the development of Student Reading Improvement Plans that are responsive to individual student needs.

Finally, Alabama has prioritized sustaining improvement through student-centered coaching. Coaching efforts focus on strengthening instruction by grounding professional conversations in student work and student outcomes, ensuring that professional learning leads to measurable changes in classroom practice.

In addition to K–12 implementation, Alabama has invested in long-term prevention by supporting partnerships with educator preparation programs and institutions of higher education. These partnerships help ensure that new teachers enter classrooms with a strong foundation in evidence-based reading instruction.

Teaching children to read is both an educational imperative and a sound public investment. Economic analyses of high-quality early childhood and early literacy efforts consistently show strong returns on investment. Alabama’s early-grade outcomes reflect the value of pairing clear policy expectations with sustained implementation support. Public reporting on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has documented notable gains in Alabama’s fourth-grade reading performance from 49th in the nation in 2019 and 34th in the nation in 2024 over time.

Based on Alabama’s experience, federal partnership plays an essential role in sustaining effective literacy systems. Federal investments are most helpful when

they support the structures that make evidence-based practice durable at scale. These include sustained professional learning and coaching capacity, early identification and intervention supports that allow schools to respond quickly to student need, and family-facing data systems that reduce administrative burden while protecting instructional time.

Alabama’s experience shows what is possible when literacy policy is paired with strong implementation: clear expectations, skilled educators, student-centered coaching, data-informed decision-making, and engaged families. Thank you for your commitment to improving literacy outcomes for students across the nation and for the opportunity to share Alabama’s work. I would be honored to answer your questions.

References

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