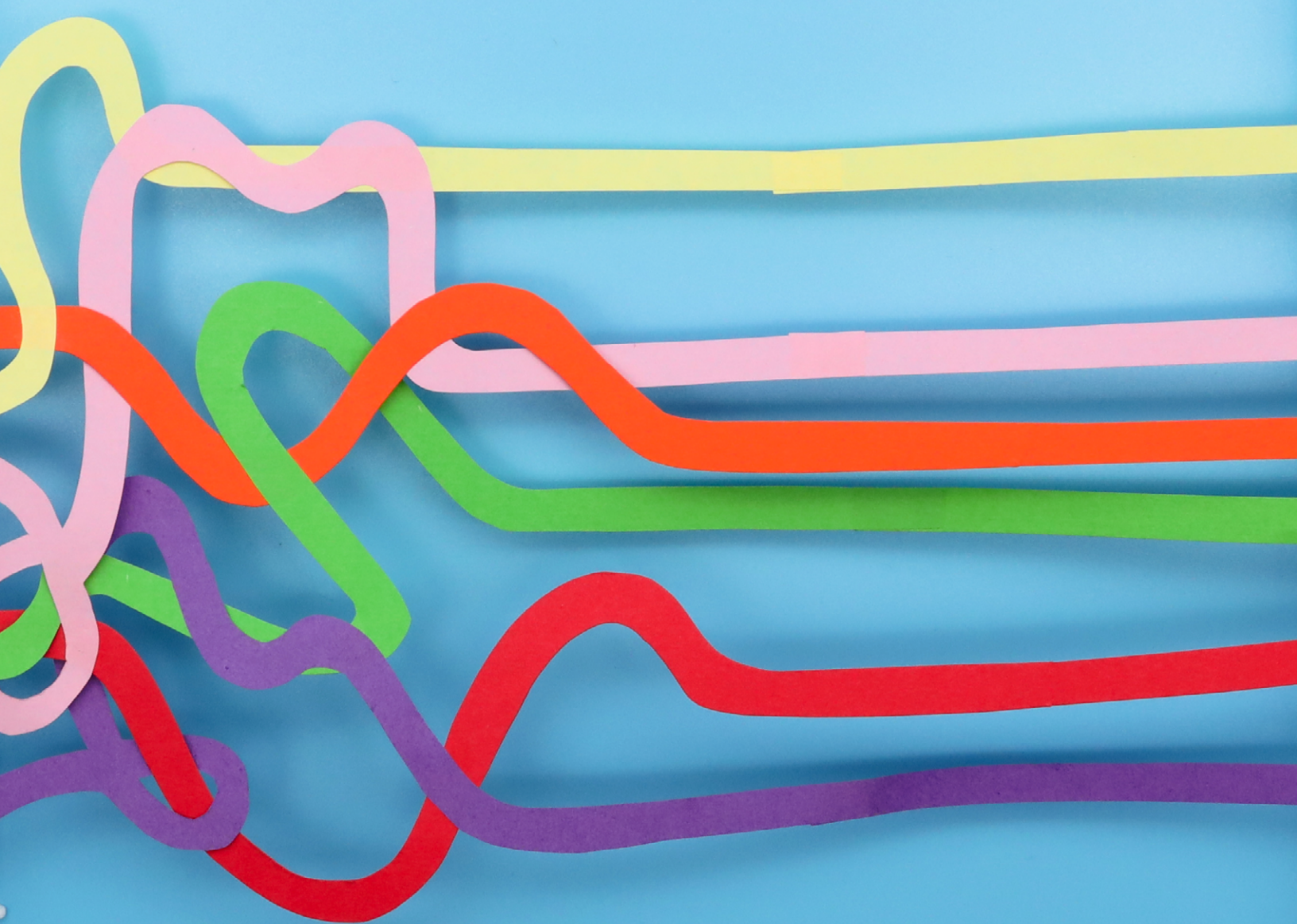


**GUIDE**

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# Improving alignment on early learning: Bringing district leaders together



The long-standing debate about the best way to teach kids to read continues, though one school of thought has dominated recent conversations. Momentum has gathered behind the science of reading—building literacy around the “Big Five” essentials (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). This evidence-based approach is now generally accepted as the most effective way to teach kids how to read.

But there are still lingering conceptions and misconceptions about what good reading looks like. That is, kids first learn to read and then can read to learn, versus both of these processes happening simultaneously.

If district leaders and teachers aren’t aligned on how reading should be taught and assessed, they may wind up making contradictory decisions and/or decisions with unanticipated—and possibly negative—consequences.

In this guide, we’ll focus on the need to assess student literacy in the context of science of reading-based instruction. We’ll review some of the common communication hurdles facing educators and explore ways they can come together to support developing readers with early learning assessments. Our hope is that we can diffuse some of the stalemates that may slow progress while helping create more equitable opportunities for kids to become confident readers for life.

Let’s look at some of the ways you can bring everyone together.

## **Step 1: Assemble your team**

Coalition-building from the outset is crucial. You don’t want teachers feeling like the assessment plan is being dictated to them from on high. Pull together a group of district leaders, school leaders, and a cross-section of teachers—people who can help develop a strategy and be an advocate when it’s ready to share.

## **Step 2: Align around consensus**

Before exploring where the points of disagreement are, it can be helpful to start on a positive note. Talk about where there’s consensus. [Several key organizations](#) that focus on the learning and developmental needs of the youngest learners (through third grade) agree that early childhood assessments should do three things:

1. Put purpose front and center
2. Be clearly and explicitly integrated into the overall system, including the curriculum and instruction
3. Optimize a child’s learning

Spend some time finding your common ground, even if that means starting with the three points above to break the ice.

### Step 3: Agree on instructional goals and interventions

Start by documenting what domains are up for discussion. What’s being taught but not assessed? Are you giving students opportunities to learn the domains, from phonemic awareness to vocabulary?

For example, if you’re focusing on vocabulary, students need the opportunity to read texts that contain words they don’t know. That way, they have to use learned skills to make meaning of the words. To find out where students stand, you can assess them in these areas—and continue to measure their progress. If you’re not intentionally helping students build these skills, you may wind up with an instructional practice that’s not focusing on vocabulary as much as needed for your kids.

You can use the table below to ensure that what you want to assess matches what you’re teaching.

What is the domain of focus?	Will this be a goal for instruction or intervention?	Will this be assessed?
Example: Mathematics skill development	Yes, both	

Once you’ve done the work of mapping out your educational program’s goals for instruction and intervention, think about some of the other support tools you have. Here are a couple of examples:

- Will your students have access to high-quality texts that are cognitively demanding and rooted in their lived experiences? Students are typically better at reading texts with themes they’re interested in or that they feel connect to their real lives. These culturally responsive and equitable practices keep students at the center of learning.
- Are the classroom walkthrough or observation instruments in your district oriented toward what you want to see in reading instruction?

### Step 4: Determine specific assessment needs

Now you can work on the purpose for your assessment. Your purpose should translate clearly into decisions. For example, what decisions do you want to inform with the assessment data (e.g., screening or progress monitoring)? Will you want insights to inform differentiation and scaffolding? You'll also want to address how you'll get the data into teachers' hands.

When you narrow down your purpose, you can see whether and how each decision results in a clear benefit to the students being assessed.

Assessment purposes generally fall into three categories: decisions about eligibility, instructional planning, and effectiveness (evaluation). You can use the three tables below to determine which decisions should be informed by data, which type of assessment is designed for this purpose, and which specific assessment tools you are considering.

Another area to think about alongside assessment is professional development. Teaching based on the science of reading still lags in colleges of education, so teachers often learn how to do this on the job. Being able to connect the desire to teach reading with a strong professional learning component helps reinforce the purpose all parties agree to.

#### Eligibility

What data-driven decision do we need to make?	What type of assessment can help inform this decision?	What are the candidate assessment tools we can use?
Example: Which students may need intervention in early literacy?	Screening	

**Effectiveness (evaluation)**

What data-driven decision do we need to make?	What type of assessment can help inform this decision?	What are the candidate assessment tools we can use?
Example: How much progress are students making in the intervention program?	Progress monitoring	

**Instructional planning**

What data-driven decision do we need to make?	What type of assessment can help inform this decision?	What are the candidate assessment tools we can use?
Example: In which specific areas of fluency does the student need intervention?	Fluency assessments	

## Step 5: Evaluate your options

Your next step is to document your assessment options and narrow down the list. As you do this, figure out if all the elements can talk to each other. For example, think about how an assessment relates to how you're asking teachers to teach reading, and make sure you're taking into account the curriculum and texts they'll need to be successful.

Here are a few factors to consider:

### Reliability and validity

- What evidence is available to support that the assessments are reliable and valid for your intended purpose?

### Ease of use and support for decision-making

- Are reports easy to use?
- How will teachers use the reports?
- Will teachers be able to make instructional decisions based on the reports?
- Will teachers be able to get information back quickly?

### Method

- Are all the candidates on your list tests? Or do some enlist observations, interviews, or embedded tasks?
- Which options use technology?
- Which assessments provide evidence of what a student can do, or is ready to do, compared with what a student cannot do?
- Which options are most authentic? Do they make use of realistic and everyday situations, incorporating elements of interaction or accommodating multiple behaviors across multiple settings and situations?

### Opportunities for practice

- Do any assessments provide connected reading practice?
- Are there options for students to practice independently?
- Are these opportunities aligned with the science of reading?

### Compatibility

- Which methods work well together to paint a holistic picture of each child's learning and growth?

Use the table below to get a clear view of the various assessment methods under consideration.

What is the candidate assessment tool?	What is the assessment method used?	Where/how is it administered?	What information/evidence does it provide about students (i.e., can do, cannot do, ready to do)?	Which features of this tool reach toward authenticity?
Example: Learning behaviors checklist	Observation	Classroom; teacher completes checklist on paper	Can the student do the learning behaviors (e.g., following directions, asking questions)?	Takes place in student's everyday context, across multiple settings and situations, with multiple opportunities for evidence

## Step 6: Don't forget professional development

Studies show that classroom achievement improves when teachers participate in professional development focused on addressing their students' learning challenges.

Look for ways to support and grow teachers' skills. Do they have the skills to focus on the reading essentials? Do they have access to communities of practice with other teachers who are going through similar challenges? That's a great way for them to build and work through ideas together. Whatever opportunities you come up with, make sure administrators are on board.



## Coming together

There's an African proverb that says, "A single bracelet does not jingle." To help kids succeed in early learning, diverse interests—from district and school leaders to teachers—need to come together. By aligning around common ground, instructional goals and interventions, and the purpose of your assessment, it's easier to overcome the roadblocks and forge progress.



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