# Understanding the Reading Ecosystem

## A Guide for Leaders

# Introduction

It's basic biology: we wouldn't plant a seed and expect it to grow without the right soil, sunlight, and resources. Yet, year after year, in district after district, we invest time and money in reading initiatives without cultivating the ecosystems needed to support them.

More than half of surveyed district leaders told EdWeek they plan to spend $200,000 or more on K-2 "science of reading" materials this year (Bakley et al., 2024). However, decades of educational reforms suggest that these investments are unlikely to have their full impact if they are not coupled with the critical mindsets, beliefs, systems, and structures that support a high-quality reading ecosystem. For students, the stakes are incredibly high. According to the most recent data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only one-third of U.S. fourth graders are reading proficiently—a number that has remained stagnant for decades since the release of the National Reading Panel Report and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Ensuring every child, everywhere, is a reader requires leaders to invest in more than just materials and consider how they are building and sustaining a comprehensive reading ecosystem. In this guide, we define what we mean by "ecosystem" and provide a set of reflection questions that can guide leaders as they examine their own reading ecosystem and needs.

## Inside:


- What is a reading ecosystem?
- Why a Reading Ecosystem Alignment Diagnostic?
- What does the reading ecosystem include?
- What questions should I be asking about my reading ecosystem?
- Where can I turn for more support?

# First, what is a reading ecosystem?

At Lit, we use the term “reading ecosystem” to define the systems, structures, and components that support evidence-based reading instruction at scale. Like any ecosystem in nature, the individual parts are distinct but connected. We focus on four domains:


How did we determine what makes up the reading ecosystem?

We pored over research, engaged external experts, and leveraged our own lived experience as leaders and teachers to weave together the elements of research-based reading instruction with knowledge about how people, schools, and systems get better over time. We’ve used our indicators of a high-quality reading ecosystem (captured in Lit’s Reading Ecosystem Alignment Diagnostic) to diagnose more than 40 systems, gathering input and data to refine our approach over time.

Research and equity must be woven throughout all domains and are critical differentiators. Simply selecting any curriculum, for example, is not a hallmark of a high-quality reading ecosystem. The curriculum must be rigorous, standards-aligned, and reflect research about how children learn to read. Instructional practices must be designed to honor and build upon students’ perspectives, prior knowledge, and experiences while preparing them to grapple with any and all texts they choose to read.

A highly effective, comprehensive reading ecosystem should guarantee that all students—regardless of background, identity, learning differences, and external circumstances—have equitable access to high standards, necessary skills, rigorous content, and supportive instruction.

Dig Deeper: Lit’s Instructional Equity and the Science of Reading Knowledge List is a great place to dig deeper into what we mean when we say an ecosystem must, “reflect research about how children learn to read.”

## Why a Reading Ecosystem Alignment Diagnostic?

Amidst rampant debate about the most effective ways to teach children to read, Congress convened the National Reading Panel in 1997 to investigate and distill decades of educational research on reading instruction. After reviewing more than 100,000 studies, the panel found that teaching students to read requires a combination of approaches: explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, systematic phonics instruction, fluency practice through guided oral reading, direct vocabulary instruction, and strategies to support reading comprehension, such as building background knowledge (National Reading Panel, 2020).

Those findings, however, did little to immediately change America's reading outcomes.

We know that 95% of elementary students, regardless of background, are cognitively capable of learning to read when they receive sufficient direct instruction in these foundational skills (Kilpatrick, 2015). Yet, according to the most recent National Assessment of Academic Progress, just one-third of U.S. fourth graders are reading proficiently. Those numbers are more startling for students of color. Just 18% of American Indian/Alaska Native students, 21% of Hispanic students, and 17% of Black students met proficiency in fourth grade in 2022. (NAEP, 2022).

This gap exists because our nation's prevailing approach to reading instruction is not aligned with the science of how students learn to read, often referred to as the "science of reading." Thirty-nine states have implemented "science of reading" laws designed to increase the usage of evidence-based practices and high-quality instructional materials (Schwartz, 2024). In the rush, however, implementation gaps persist. Teacher education programs have been slow to fully align their own instruction to the science of reading, leaving knowledge and mindset gaps that complicate new materials adoption and usage (Ellis, et al., 2023).

This gap exists because our nation's prevailing approach to reading instruction is not aligned with the science of how students actually learn to read.

While research about how students learn to read abounds, there is less accessible research about the specific instructional practices that support student reading and many educators lack the training and background knowledge to separate evidence-based practices from "best practices" touted in the field (Stanovich, 2003).

Leaders are often left out of the "science of reading" conversation with professional learning dollars and

supports prioritized for teachers first. Without relevant content knowledge, it can be difficult to know where to start or what to do next. In the rush to implement, it can also be easy to assemble resources, materials, and tools without taking the time to investigate how they work together to support instructional coherence and how practices are aligned across schools and classrooms, creating an inconsistent student experience and reproducing inequitable outcomes across the system.

Lit created the READ to:

- Help clarify the evidence- and research-based practices that support reading instruction and successful system-wide implementation.
- Offer a tool for leaders to see their system, identifying gaps in system-wide alignment or coherence that might be preventing equitable outcomes.
- Assert the role that leaders can play in driving reading transformation, from cultivating and keeping focus on a shared vision of literacy excellence to using data to strengthen the system over time.

*RAND defines instructional coherence as the circumstances "in which all instruction-related messaging and supports—for example, via curriculum materials and professional learning—provide everyone from coaches to teachers and other instructional staff with clear and mutually reinforcing messages about what to teach and how to teach it" (Kaufman, et al., 2023, p. 5).*

## What does the reading ecosystem include?

At a high level, an excellent reading ecosystem must combine the components of early reading (word recognition and reading comprehension) with the systems and structures that support high-quality instruction, such as instructional coaching, cycles of data analysis and action, and regular professional learning. Lit created the Reading Ecosystem Alignment Diagnostic (READ) to evaluate a reading ecosystem. We use the READ to look across the four domains and ask:

PROGRAM DESIGN: Are there high-quality, research-aligned curricula and assessments that reflect what we know about how children learn to read?

ENABLING STRUCTURES: Are there resources, systems, and structures in place to support instruction, ongoing data analysis, and professional learning?

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP: Do leaders have a clear vision for literacy excellence? Are there structures to develop people and the system, like data-driven continuous improvement, instructional coaching, and collaborative planning?

TEACHING & LEARNING: Is instruction asset-based, grade-level appropriate, and standards-aligned? Are students actively engaged and showing ownership of their learning and the learning community? Is there support for all students to meet grade-level standards?

*The full READ is 16 pages and includes three gateways, four domains, and 10 indicators of a research-aligned reading ecosystem.*

# The Reading Ecosystem

## PROGRAM DESIGN

- High-quality, research-aligned curricula for foundational skills and reading comprehension
- Comprehensive, aligned formative and summative assessments and assessment strategy

## TEACHING & LEARNING

- Asset-based, grade-level appropriate, standards-aligned instruction in word recognition and reading comprehension
- Ongoing cycles of assessment and targeted response based on disaggregated student data
- Space for students to practice and apply what they are learning and persevere through productive struggle
- Support for all students to meet grade level standards, including those whose first language is other than English

**RESEARCH & EQUITY**

## ENABLING STRUCTURES

- Appropriate resource allocation (time, staff)
- Systems for regularly and efficiently administering, collecting, and monitoring data
- Ongoing routines and tools for data analysis and planning
- Aligned, system-wide structures, strategy, and tools to regularly develop leaders and teachers

## INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

- A clear, compelling vision for literacy excellence
- Regular cycles of data-informed continuous improvement
- Ongoing observation and feedback cycles
- Continuous, high-quality curriculum internalization and planning
- A regular, rigorous scope and sequence of leader and teacher professional learning

Lit's framework for the reading ecosystem makes visible five critical beliefs about supporting reading outcomes at scale.

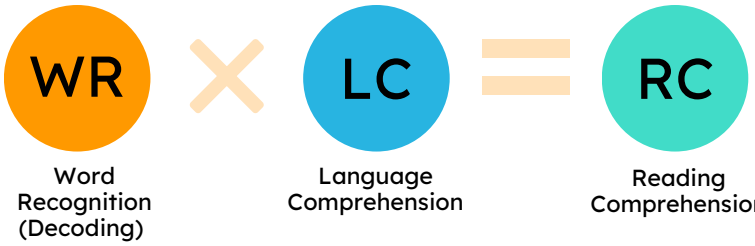
Reading instruction must reflect the research about how children learn to read.

Borrowing from Louisa Moats, the science of reading:

> is not an ideology, a philosophy, a political agenda, a one-size-fits-all approach, a program of instruction, nor a specific component of instruction. It is the emerging consensus from many related disciplines, based on literally thousands of studies, supported by hundreds of millions of research dollars, conducted across the world in many languages. These studies have revealed a great deal about how we learn to read, what goes wrong when students don't learn, and what kind of instruction is most likely to work the best for the most students (Moats, 2019).

Our vision for the reading ecosystem is grounded in the science of reading and two research-based frameworks: the Simple View of Reading and Hollis Scarborough's Reading Rope, which help us visualize the complex, interconnected processes that support reading.

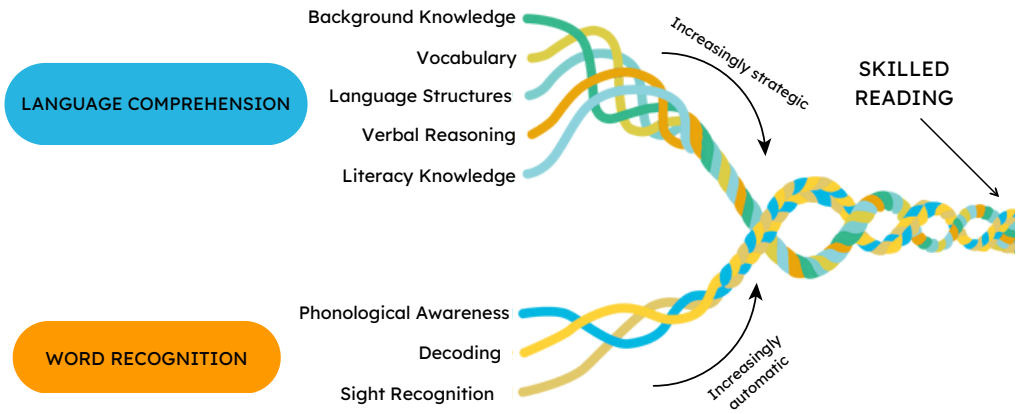
The Simple View of Reading (Gough and Tunmer, 1986) explains that reading comprehension comes from two key skills: word recognition and language comprehension.




Word recognition is about reading the words on the page accurately. It involves matching each printed letter or letter combination to its corresponding sound (also known as decoding). Language comprehension is about understanding and making sense of spoken language. It requires us to know vocabulary and have some knowledge of the topic of conversation. Together, these skills help us understand what we read. The Simple View illustrates that Reading Comprehension (RC) is the product of Word Recognition (WR) and Language Comprehension (LC). The equation is multiplicative, so if either factor (decoding or language comprehension) is 0, the product (reading comprehension) will be zero.

The "Reading Rope," first introduced by Hollis Scarborough, identifies each component or strand

that makes up both the Decoding and Language Comprehension parts identified in The Simple View of Reading (Scarborough, 2001).




Adapted from Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice.

With the Simple View and the Reading Rope as our guide, we believe that a robust, research-aligned reading ecosystem must engage students in both word recognition instruction reflective of the principles of structured language and literacy and reading comprehension instruction grounded in making meaning of text through reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Curriculum, assessments, and professional learning structures must address both strands of the rope in ways that create coherence across the system.

High-quality curriculum and instruction must be paired with the time, resources, and routines needed to implement with fidelity.

We also know that simply selecting high-quality curriculum and assessments is not enough. At Lit, we've conducted more than 40 "Lit Quality Reviews" to examine systems' reading ecosystems. We often find that systems invest significant time selecting materials and assessments but then struggle to create the necessary time and resources to implement with fidelity. Instructional blocks may not meet the minimum requirements of the curriculum or data analysis days are not aligned to the windows when data can be most useful for instruction.

Wider research supports the idea that materials, alone, are not sufficient to move outcomes. In 2019, the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University studied the impact of specific math textbook use on fourth- and fifth-grade student test scores across four years. They found no significant difference in outcomes based on materials alone. The authors named that, "it is possible

that, with greater supports for classroom implementation, the advantages of specific curricula would emerge and we would see larger differences" (Blazer et al., 2019, p. 31). In many cases, teachers did not have clear expectations, systems to support implementation fidelity, or professional learning related to the curriculum. "The average teacher received just one day of training [on the materials] in the current year, and fewer than four days over their entire careers" (Blazer et al., 2019, p. 31).

Specific to English Language Arts, a 2021 EdReports report found that, "22.8 percent of teachers reported receiving no professional learning on how to implement classroom materials. Another 37.7 percent received just one to five hours. Less than a tenth of teachers (9.8 percent) received more than twenty hours of professional learning. And the perceived quality of this professional learning was low. Half of teachers stated that this training 'did not prepare me at all' or to a 'slight extent'" (EdReports, 2021).

Instructional leaders are critical drivers of the reading ecosystem.

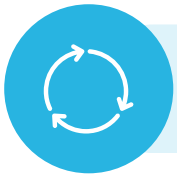
In a 2022 study, the Wallace Foundation found "not a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership" (Walstrom, 2010). While teachers are the drivers of change in the classroom, the READ recognizes that no individual teacher is positioned to ensure school or system-wide change. We believe the weight for leading change lies on the shoulders of leaders who should create the culture, conditions, and structures for teachers to teach reading effectively. That same Wallace Foundation study identified a set of core leadership practices that are effective across contexts, including setting direction, organizational design, people management and managing instruction (Walstrom, 2010). Our view of a reading ecosystem weaves these practices together with the science of reading.

Instructional leaders, for example, can help create, lead, and support ongoing professional development for teachers, a practice shown to strongly improve teacher knowledge and practice (Rice, et al., 2024) and, to a lesser extent, student outcomes (Didion, et al., 2020). They can provide ongoing instructional coaching, "considered a key lever for improving teachers' classroom instruction and for translating knowledge into new classroom practices" (Kraft, et al., 2028, p. 2). If coherence is critical to a functioning reading ecosystem, leaders support that coherence by anchoring systems and structures in a shared vision for reading instruction.

An equitable learning environment meets every student where they are and gives them the tools and experiences they need to productively struggle and persevere.

We believe an equitable reading ecosystem must provide all students with the necessary scaffolds and support to work with and meet grade-level standards, including those who read, write, speak, or listen below grade level or whose first language is not English. “Educators must consider who is learning, what they need, and why they need it, so that instruction can be systematically designed to ensure that it is appropriately differentiated for each student” (Young, 2024, p. 13).This requires deeply understanding individual students, including the knowledge and experiences they come in with, and using ongoing cycles of data and intervention to meet their unique needs. It means planning for additional scaffolds so all students can be successful and offering those scaffolds without judgment.

We also believe, in the words of Zaretta Hammond, that scaffolding is meant to be temporary: “Having students carry more of the cognitive load and allowing the scaffolding to fall away over time is what stimulates brain growth, so that cognitively your brain says, ‘Oh, I need to step up. I need to get stronger. I need to figure that out.’ We have to make the brain work” (Hammond, 2020). An equitable reading ecosystem engages students in productive struggle so they can persevere and helps foster a growth mindset about reading and learning.



Data and iteration help ecosystems get better over time.

Creating and sustaining a high-quality reading ecosystem takes more than just identifying and implementing a set of materials, systems, and structures. Just like an ecosystem in nature, any reading ecosystem should evolve over time through measured, data-driven iteration and cycles of improvement.

During cycles of improvement, teachers and leaders name the next data-driven practice to implement or enhance, accelerate the system’s ability to execute, and then measure and share the impact. These cycles help leaders not just drive incremental change but also understand the conditions needed for that change to thrive. “It fosters a culture where educators learn from each other and apply new strategies, driving sustained growth in student outcomes” (Dixon & Palmer, 2020).

## What questions should I be asking about my reading ecosystem?

Lit leverages the Reading Ecosystem Alignment Diagnostic (READ) to evaluate a district's or school's reading ecosystem. Our goal is to better understand both the strengths and opportunities in a system's current approach to make visible the potential gap between their vision and their current realities. The process is designed to help system leaders understand what's missing in their approach but also where there are gaps in alignment, coherence, and rigor.

### Leaders should be asking:

1. Have we articulated a clear vision and expectations for each domain in our reading ecosystem?
2. Do those expectations align with research about how children learn to read and the instructional methods that support reading?
3. Is there coherence across domains? For example, are our professional learning and instructional coaching structures aligned to curriculum and assessments? Does reading instruction feel cohesive and connected for students?
4. Is there alignment across campuses and classes in our district/system?
5. Do we have systems and routines to inspect what we expect?
6. Are there gaps in our knowledge and understanding that make it difficult to answer?

### ANSWERING "NO?" OR "NOT SURE"?

During a Lit Quality Review, our team of reading experts and instructional leaders can provide an external evaluation of your current reading ecosystem, culminating in a report that diagnoses your system's strengths and opportunities along with suggested focus areas. We'll pore over your system's data and artifacts, observe instruction on the ground, and conduct stakeholder interviews to paint a comprehensive picture of your current state. Reach out to learn more.

## Where can I turn for more support?

Auditing your reading ecosystem requires a deep understanding of evidence-based practices and research about how children learn to read. To strengthen your lens, you can:

- Deepen your understanding of the science of reading and instructional equity. Lit's Instructional Equity and the Science of Reading Knowledge List rounds up key research and resources that explain the science of reading and its connections to instructional equity. These same resources informed our views about the reading ecosystem.

- Better understand why certain practices are not part of a research-aligned reading program. Dig into that research in Lit's Leveled Reading and Sight Words Revisited Knowledge Lists.

- Leverage external reviews of key reading curricula and assessments. At Lit, we start by triangulating external reviews with our own internally developed criteria for research alignment. Consider the Reading League's Curriculum Navigation Reports, Louisiana Believes Curricular Reports, and EdReports as places to start.

- Dig deeper into systems, structures, and routines. Our ecosystem framework is designed to marry the "science of reading" with evidence-based practices in instructional leadership. For the latter, we recommend Driven by Data 2.0: A Practical Guide for School Leaders and Leverage Leadership 2.0: A Practical Guide to Building Exceptional Schools as a place to start.

This work is hard. Especially when you're juggling multiple priorities and needs. At Lit, we spend every day thinking about reading and the reading ecosystem. We can support you as you think about yours. Learn more about how can we partner together.

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# Every kid, everywhere, a reader.

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