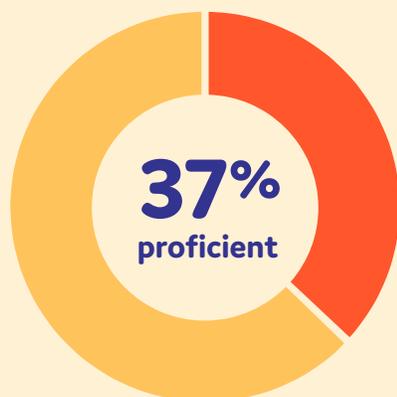


# How Educators in Alaska Can Build Students' Early Literacy Skills in In-Person and Online Learning Environments

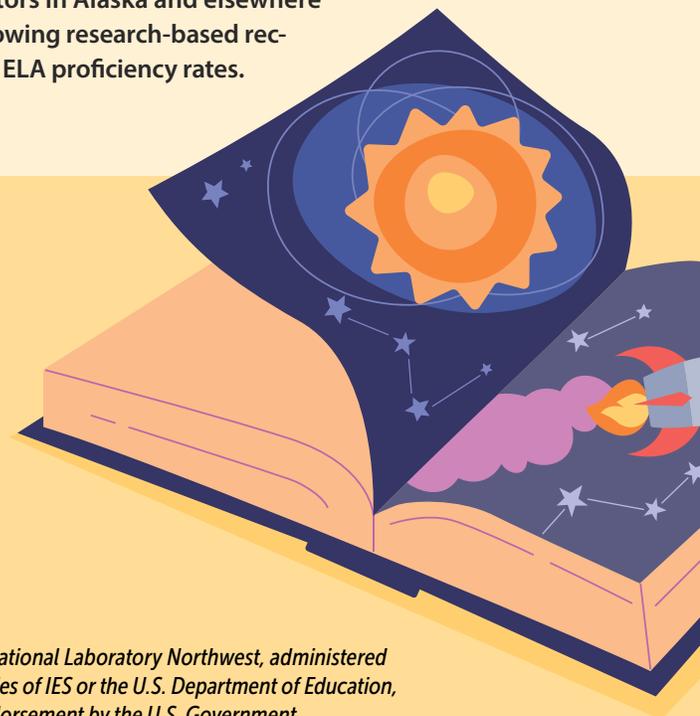
Early literacy is one of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development's (DEED) five strategic priorities for education.<sup>1</sup> Building these skills in early grades is one key to later success: Students who are not proficient in reading by grade 3 are four times less likely to graduate on time from high school.<sup>2</sup>



**In Alaska, 37 percent of all students were proficient in English language arts (ELA) by grade 3 in 2018/19. This varied from 6 to 50 percent among different student groups.<sup>3</sup>**

To support Alaska educators, REL Northwest and the Region 16 Comprehensive Center provided training on evidence-based strategies for teaching early literacy. This infographic summarizes the information in those trainings. Whether teaching online or in person, educators in Alaska and elsewhere can consider using the following research-based recommendations to improve ELA proficiency rates.

This infographic is based on the recommendations of the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) Practice Guide *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* as well as additional research and strategies on early literacy.



*This infographic was prepared under Contract ED-IES-17-C-0009 by Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest, administered by Education Northwest. The content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.*

# WWC Practice Guide Recommendations and Strategies: Helping Educators Build Literacy Skills Among Alaska's Youngest Learners

High-quality teachers have a significant positive impact on student outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Alaska educators can play a critical role in ensuring that students develop the literacy skills they need to succeed in school and in life.

These four recommendations and supporting strategies from the WWC practice guide are foundational to teaching literacy skills in any setting: in-person, hybrid, or online.<sup>5</sup>

## 1 Teach students academic language skills, including the use of inferential and narrative language, and vocabulary knowledge.

Help students understand what they read in school by teaching them to make inferences, relate a series of events, and identify diverse vocabulary and grammatical structures.

- Before, during, or after reading activities, ask students open-ended questions to connect what they read to the world around them.
- Ask students to predict the ending of a story or to summarize a story they just heard.



## 2 Develop awareness of the segments of sounds in speech and how they link to letters.

Students who can isolate sounds and connect the sounds to letters of the alphabet are better able to read words and understand what they read.

- Help students isolate and identify segments of sounds in words by using kinesthetic tools like counters, blocks, or chips.
- Teach the letters of the alphabet with corresponding sounds. Start with single letters and move up to consonant blends, such as *sm*, *st*, or *fl*.



## 3 Teach students to decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words.

When students learn to identify meaningful parts of words, they begin to recognize patterns and can understand more complex words.

- Use blending boards and Elkonin sound boxes to guide students through blending letter sounds and recognizing sound-spelling patterns.
- Teach students about different word parts—suffixes, prefixes, and roots—and coach them to use a word-analysis strategy to break down words they don't know.

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**Elkonin sound boxes<sup>6</sup>** provide a structure for students to break down, identify, and blend sounds in words. After the teacher says the word out loud, the student uses the cells of the Elkonin box to visually separate the word's unique sounds. Once the student has identified the sounds, they should read the word back to practice blending.

## 4 Ensure that each student reads connected text every day to support reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

Students should have opportunities to read connected text (multiple related sentences) every day. Share diverse genres and content to build students' fluency. Educators can also support fluency by giving students opportunities to read both by themselves and alongside a more advanced reader.

- Conduct one-on-one and small-group reading where a parent or teacher models and scaffolds word-reading strategies.
- Help students learn to self-correct word-reading errors by self-monitoring their own reading and understanding of text.



## More Evidence-Based Recommendations to Support Student Literacy

The strategies below build on the WWC practice guide recommendations. They provide specific resources for Alaska educators as well as considerations for teaching to the state's racially and economically diverse student population. These strategies were developed based on peer-reviewed research and best practices for supporting early literacy.

1

### Build relationships with partners in learning.

Parents and caregivers can support educators by building students' literacy skills at home.<sup>7</sup> This is especially important for students who need extra guidance.

- If educators have a hard time connecting with caregivers face-to-face or on the phone, they can try alternative strategies like sending personalized text messages.<sup>8</sup>
- Learn about students' interests, families, and communities to help recommend engaging, culturally relevant content.



2

### Ensure all students have access to reading materials.

Students from lower-income communities may have less access to varied reading materials outside the classroom, meaning their families may spend more time and energy seeking those resources.<sup>9</sup>

- Remove barriers for families by connecting them with free print, digital, and audiobook resources through the Alaska State Library's Tumblebooks program<sup>10</sup>, Ready to Read Alaska<sup>11</sup>, or other streaming services.

3

### Use formative assessment to identify specific challenge areas.

When educators know exactly where each student struggles, they can tailor instructional approaches to address students' specific needs.

- Conduct formative assessments to understand how students perform on specific reading or comprehension tasks. In virtual environments, formative assessments could be conducted in one-on-one virtual meetings or in small breakout rooms.
- Use the resulting data to adjust teaching strategies and provide additional support as needed.<sup>12</sup>

## Translating In-Person Literacy Support to a Remote Environment

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many educators in Alaska and elsewhere to teach in unfamiliar online environments. Although many teaching strategies that work face to face can apply to remote teaching, educators may need to modify elements of their practice to engage students online. The evidence-based strategies in this box can guide planning and practice when transitioning from an in-person to a remote environment.

### Think backwards about the skill being taught.

Backward design<sup>13</sup> can help educators focus on the specific skill or concept students need to learn and then develop or adapt activities to foster that skill. The activity a teacher would normally use in person may not translate perfectly to an online format. However, working backwards, the teacher can develop a remote learning exercise to target the same skill.

### Consider how to make face-to-face strategies virtual.

After identifying a specific skill or concept, educators can consider how they would teach it in person: What would work the same in a virtual setting, and which elements of the approach would need to change?

Some activities, like read-alouds and blending boards, work well with videoconferencing tools. For other activities, prioritize maximizing student engagement and building relationships in remote settings.<sup>14</sup> Find helpful ideas through Edutopia<sup>15</sup> or the University of Florida Literacy Institute.<sup>16</sup>

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