

2023–24

South Carolina LETRS Training Implementation Analysis

Samantha Durrance
Bridget Johnson

The purpose of this brief is to provide information about district and school-level implementation of Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) professional development in South Carolina as of 2023-24. This brief was developed at the request of, and in collaboration with, the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE).

[The Region 6 Comprehensive Center \(RC6\)](#) is operated by SERVE at UNC Greensboro and provides technical assistance to Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Assistance is tailored to the needs of the individual states while addressing the priorities of the U.S. Department of Education.

[SERVE](#) is a university-based research, development, dissemination, evaluation, and technical assistance center. For over 30 years, SERVE has worked with educators and policymakers to improve education. Permeating everything we do is our commitment to engaging collaboratively with our clients to do high-quality, important, and useful work.

Citation:

This publication is in the public domain. While permission to reprint is not necessary, reproductions should be cited as:

Durrance, S., & Johnson, B. (2024). *South Carolina LETRS Training Implementation Analysis: 2023-24*. Greensboro, NC: SERVE at UNC Greensboro.

Acknowledgements:

The authors are grateful to Abbey Duggins, Marie Gibbons, Charlene Gleaton, and Taylor Seale at the South Carolina Department of Education for their contributions to, and review of, the final document.

This brief was prepared by the Region 6 Comprehensive Center under Award #S283B190055 for the Office of Program and Grantee Support Services (PGSS) within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) of the U.S. Department of Education and is administered by SERVE at UNC Greensboro. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the PGSS or OESE or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. © 2024 SERVE at UNC Greensboro.

A copy of this publication can be downloaded from the Region 6 Comprehensive Center website at: <https://www.region6cc.org/resources>.

Contents

- I. Introduction 1
- II. History of LETRS in South Carolina..... 1
- III. Methodology Summary 2
- IV. Findings..... 2
 - 1. Success Factors..... 3
 - School and Instructional Leadership 3
 - Togetherness..... 4
 - Other Factors..... 5
 - 2. Managing Training and School and District Supports 5
 - Managing Training..... 5
 - Supports for Teachers 6
 - Supports for Schools 7
 - 3. Implementation Challenges 8
 - 4. Value of the Training and Impacts to Date..... 9
 - The Value of Training 9
 - Impacts to Date 12
 - 5. Needs, Suggestions, and Advice for Future Trainees 14
 - Needs and Suggestions 15
 - Advice for Beginning LETRS..... 17
- Appendix A: Methodology 1

I. Introduction

The purpose of this brief is to provide information about district and school-level implementation of Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) professional development in South Carolina as of 2023-24. The [Region 6 Comprehensive Center \(RC6\)](#) at SERVE conducted this descriptive work at the request of, and in collaboration with, the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE).

The brief begins with a short description of the statutes and state initiatives that provided the context within which schools and districts implemented the LETRS professional development. Following this is a short summary of the methodology used to gather perspectives from educators on the implementation of LETRS in South Carolina and then an extensive description of implementation analysis findings. Important aspects of the districts' and schools' experiences with the implementation of LETRS are summarized, followed by a summary of needs, suggestions, and advice for future trainees expressed by the districts and schools in the interviews conducted by RC6. These needs, suggestions, and advice serve as recommendations for the SCDE, district leaders, and school administrators to consider as they move forward with LETRS training.

II. History of LETRS in South Carolina

Proviso 1A.73 of the SC General Appropriations Bill for Fiscal Year 2023-24 requires the SCDE to provide training in foundational literacy skills to every educator certified in early childhood, elementary, or special education who works with students in kindergarten through grade three, as well as elementary administrators. In response to this legislative requirement, the Lexia LETRS® Suite was selected as the professional development course that would give early childhood and elementary educators and administrators extensive knowledge of language and literacy and equip them to be experts in the science of reading. LETRS was developed by Dr. Louisa Moats and Dr. Carol Tolman, both leaders in the field of literacy. According to the publisher, Lexia LETRS “teaches the skills needed to master the foundational and fundamentals of reading and writing instruction—phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and written language” ([Lexia, 2024](#)).

Interest in LETRS training began in South Carolina several years before the state was required to provide training in foundational literacy skills. In 2019-20, the state launched the Palmetto Literacy Project (PLP), an initiative to support selected schools in strengthening literacy outcomes. A total of 265 PLP schools were identified based on the percentage of third graders performing at the Does Not Meet (DNM) level on the 2019 SC READY English Language Arts end of grade exam. These schools were divided into Tier 2 and Tier 3 to indicate the level of support needed, with schools designated Tier 2 if 33.3% - 49.9% of their third graders scored DNM and Tier 3 if 50% or more of their third graders scored DNM. One strategy the SCDE implemented to support Tier 2 and 3 PLP schools was to align instruction with the science of reading through LETRS professional development. A total of 61 schools began LETRS training in 2021-22. Another 154 schools began the training in 2022-23, and 141 in 2023-24. All remaining schools across the state will engage eligible staff in LETRS training beginning in August 2024.

III. Methodology Summary

At the request of the SCDE, in 2023-24, researchers at the RC6 conducted interviews and focus groups to gather perspectives from state literacy specialists who provide support to PLP schools and educators who began LETRS training in 2021-22. In total, the RC6 project team conducted interviews with five state literacy specialists, six district leaders, and seven principals. The team also conducted five teacher focus groups consisting of 26 teachers, school reading coaches, and interventionists. All interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams. For more details on methodology, see Appendix A.

Information about the districts and schools included in the interviews is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Demographics of Schools Selected for Interviews (2022-23 Data)

School	Region	District Enrollment	Total Schools	School Locale ¹	Grades	School Enrollment
1. District A, School 1	Savannah River	20,000-40,000	30-50	Rural: fringe	PK-5	500+
2. District B, School 2	Lowcountry	40,000-60,000	75-100	City	PK-5	350-500
3. District B, School 3	Lowcountry	40,000-60,000	75-100	Rural: distant	PK-8	< 200
4. District C, School 4	Pee Dee	5,000-10,000	15-30	Rural: fringe	PK-5	500+
5. District D, School 5	Upstate	60,000-80,000	75-100	Suburb	PK-5	200-350
6. District E, School 6	Pee Dee	Less than 5,000	1-15	Rural: fringe	3-5	200-350
7. District F, School 7	Midlands	5,000-10,000	1-15	Rural: distant	PK-5	< 200

¹ As designated by the National Center for Education Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/index.asp>

Part IV of this brief contains a summary of interviewees’ experiences with LETRS training and how they implemented what they had learned in their settings. Findings include factors that made trainees more or less successful with training and training implementation, how school and district leaders managed training and what supports they provided to teachers and schools, challenges trainees faced in completing and/or implementing the training, the value interviewees found in the training and impacts of the training to date and identified needs and suggestions for the SCDE and advice for future trainees.

IV. Findings

The experiences of those who have completed most or all of the LETRS training units and been working to integrate the new knowledge into their settings provide insights into how the rollout of LETRS training on a statewide basis may proceed. They also reveal the supports needed by educators and schools across the state to successfully implement the knowledge and skills gained from the training. Key findings from interviews with literacy specialists, district administrators, school administrators, and teachers are grouped into five areas:

1. Success Factors
2. Managing Training and School and District Supports
3. Implementation Challenges

4. Value of the Training and Impacts to Date
5. Needs, Suggestions, and Advice for Future Trainees

1. Success Factors

Interviewees were asked to reflect on any factors that impacted trainees' ability to complete LETRS training on schedule, two years after starting, and apply what they were learning to classroom instruction. The most common factors mentioned related to school and instructional leadership from principals and reading coaches and creating a culture of "togetherness" as staff complete LETRS training. Other factors mentioned by multiple districts included guidance and district support, curricula aligned to the science of reading, and less experienced teachers being more open to LETRS learning.

School and Instructional Leadership

School administrators serve as instructional leaders.

Interviewees from all four groups in five of the six districts reported that LETRS training was most successful in schools where administrators were engaged in and supportive of the training and served as the "lead learner in the building." In schools where administrators were not as engaged, reading and instructional coaches were able to fill this role to some extent. One interviewee stated:

An administrator that is truly the lead learner in the building goes a long way. If the principal and administration and coach are all willing to engage in the training, we see higher numbers of our teachers engaging in the training. But the principal also just engaging is not enough. They have to actively and willingly engage, not talk about how time-consuming it is. Are they joyfully engaging or are they like, "I have to do this"?



Support from the leadership teams in the schools is... the key factor in the success of the implementation in the school building.

Reading coaches coordinate training and connect LETRS with classroom practice. Five districts and all types of interviewees recognized school reading coaches as "instrumental... in helping to implement LETRS." In many cases reading coaches were the main coordinators of the training at the school level. They also worked with teachers to support learning and connect the training with classroom practice, especially in schools where the principal did not have an early elementary teaching background. One interviewee noted, "Without the reading coach, I don't believe it all gets into the classrooms as quickly as it needs to."

Effective school leaders support and hold teachers accountable for translating learning to practice. For all types of interviewees and across four districts, efforts to keep teachers on track with the training and hold them accountable for both completing the training and practicing what they were learning in the classroom contributed to successful implementation. These efforts included dedicating weekly meeting time to discussing what teachers were currently learning from LETRS and how it applied to instruction, having reading coaches meet with teachers to support them in completing the Bridge to Practice activities that help them apply LETRS to their classrooms, and requiring teachers to bring their

Bridge to Practice portfolios to professional learning community (PLC) meetings to discuss how the activities went as a group.

Buy-in from school leadership can get all staff on board.

Literacy specialists and three district administrators saw buy-in from school principals, reading coaches, and teachers as key to successful completion and implementation of LETRS training. They reported more “authentic engagement” with the training and greater impacts in schools where principals saw the value of the training and led PLCs focused on LETRS. One district administrator noted, “[O]ur higher performing schools oftentimes are less likely to engage in a training like this because they don't necessarily see it as beneficial.” To overcome this resistance, this district pushed school leaders to examine their data and whether their current instruction was meeting the needs of all students.



I told my coaches that they were to actually follow up and do conferences on that Bridge to Practice... we're not just sitting here and doing this for two half days while a sub is in our room. We are going to actually implement this in the classroom and put that expectation of implementation down.

Togetherness

A feeling of, “We’re all in this together” supports learning. All types of interviewees across five districts reported that fostering a school culture around LETRS that they described as, “we are all learning together” and “we are in this together” created a safe and supportive environment for all staff to engage with the training. This culture was especially common in smaller schools with close-knit faculty who may already be accustomed to working closely together. Said one interviewee, “[I]t’s all of us in one room trying to figure things out.” Another reflected, “We shared our successes. We shared our forties that we would make on the test... we were so comfortable and honest with each other that we could have those conversations and learn and grow from others in the room.”

Completing training as a school created the right environment for togetherness. Literacy specialists, as well as school administrators and teachers from three districts, reported benefits to engaging in LETRS training as a whole-school cohort (as opposed to having separate cohorts in a school) and with staff in multiple roles, including classroom and special education teachers, and interventionists. This allowed trainees to work together to apply the training material to their specific students and school context. One interviewee said:

It was very helpful going through [LETRS] with the team here because we could talk to each other about the work, about the lessons and about the modules. And then when we had the big meeting for each module, it was good going through it together because we could all chime in on students we've all had, and we could pick out certain people who this would work for or who that would remind us of. So, it was helpful going through it with everyone. So yeah... it's harder for those who are doing it on their own or with a different group.

Other Factors

Guidance and district support helped schools stay on track. Teachers and district and school administrators across five districts spoke of the benefits of having guidance for implementing LETRS training and supportive district personnel who could respond to questions and address any issues that arose. The most commonly mentioned form of guidance was pacing charts that helped trainees stay on track and anticipate the training content on a week-by-week basis. A district administrator in one large district noted that state guidance could have been more applicable to both small and large districts.

Curricula aligned to the science of reading supported transfer to the classroom. The Palmetto Literacy Project schools who made up the first LETRS cohorts in South Carolina received new core ELA curricula around the same time they started LETRS. District administrators, school administrators, and teachers across five districts reported that the new curricula aligned well with and supported teachers in implementing what they were learning from LETRS. One district administrator saw the curriculum as “the practical piece” that enabled teachers to apply the knowledge they gained from LETRS in the classroom, pointing to the importance of having curricula that are aligned to the science of reading.

Less experienced teachers were more likely to embrace what they learned from LETRS.

Literacy Specialists and school administrators and teachers from three districts observed that teachers with less experience were sometimes “more eager” to complete LETRS training than teachers with more experience. They often had an easier time incorporating the new knowledge and strategies they learned from LETRS into their teaching practice. Teachers in one focus group spoke of a colleague who began LETRS training in her first year of teaching, saying:

[S]he’s really embraced it. And we had a hard time, some of us transitioning from what we knew about reading and writing workshop and things like that. So, I feel like she took the learning and just went straight to her classroom and applied it. This is what she knows now.

2. Managing Training and School and District Supports

District and school administrators were asked about challenges they might have faced in managing LETRS training and the supports that were offered to teachers and schools as staff worked to complete the training.

Managing Training

Both district and school administrators spoke at times in the interviews about how they managed LETRS training, especially staff transitions, verifying training completion, and remitting the information necessary to ensure that trainees received their \$500 state stipends as they completed each of the two volumes of LETRS.

Four district administrators and two school administrators interviewed reported few to no notable challenges in managing the training. Several of the district administrators noted that school reading

coaches and/or principals were responsible for tracking completions and payments and managing the logistics of training sessions, which in turn made it much more manageable for the district administrators. The two school administrators who reported having few to no difficulties managing the training said that their school reading coaches were responsible for monitoring teachers' progress and managing the logistics of training sessions.

Three of the six district administrators interviewed did note that managing many different cohorts of trainees across the district could be difficult. One administrator in a large district reported that managing more than 20 cohorts of trainees was taking up around half of their work week before they were able to shift some of the work over to an administrative assistant. Another reflected that having all remaining K-3 teachers in the district begin training at the same time in August might actually make management a bit easier since so many would be at the same point in their completion of the training. Some questions remained regarding how to handle situations where teacher transitions between schools or districts interrupted their training. As one district administrator described:

And then with the movement [of teachers between schools], of course, some folks who left a PLP school, went to a different school, have asked to continue with it. So, we have allowed them to continue. Others have chosen not to, but next year they will have to. It's going to be very interesting how we manage that next year if they started it, stopped, and now they're at a school that's starting it. Do they start over? I'm not sure. I'm going to have to get some guidance from the state on that.

Supports for Teachers

Reading coaches are integral to the success of LETRS training. The most frequently cited support for teachers was school reading coaches, who were often in charge of managing LETRS training at the school level and helping teachers put what they were learning into practice in the classroom. One school administrator described the reading coach as “a vital part of how we operate.” Administrators and teachers from five of the six districts reported that reading coaches met with teachers regularly to help keep them on schedule with LETRS training, work with them in the classroom to implement new strategies they learn from LETRS, and lead discussions of LETRS content to help reinforce the training. In the PLP schools interviewed, reading coaches had gone through the training at the same time as teachers, working shoulder to shoulder with them to integrate the new knowledge and tools into instructional practice.



I do believe that coach support has made it easier for my teachers when they see that, okay, not only am I doing this, but my literacy coach is also doing it at the same time and we're all in this together.

Teachers benefit from completing the training together. Administrators and teachers from five of the six districts interviewed valued the opportunity to complete LETRS at the same time as their colleagues. They found that this enabled them to “piggyback off one another and learn from each other.” Going through LETRS together also created opportunities for teachers to collaborate vertically across grade levels, which some interviewees said was “an eye opener.” One district administrator

noted that some schools had to enroll their teachers in different training cohorts. The district did not have professional development days spread out throughout the year and the schools knew they would not be able to find enough subs to have even one grade level go through the training together. They described the impact of having teachers in the same school in several different cohorts as “a real struggle.”

Teachers need regular, protected time to discuss LETRS together and connect what they are learning to instruction.

Interviewees from all six districts were clear about the importance of having time regularly set aside for teachers to discuss what they were learning in LETRS and how to apply it to their classrooms. This often happened during weekly PLCs, which generally took place during a common planning time or after school and were often led by the school reading coach. This dedicated time helped keep teachers on track, held them accountable for completing the training modules, and helped reinforce what they were learning from LETRS. One administrator said, “Every lesson that we did, we would always bring it back to Open Court. Do you see this in Open Court, or could you use this in your classroom? And that really helped them understand the value and the importance of what we were learning.”

All four types of interviewees pointed out that administrators, state Literacy specialists, and school reading coaches all play important roles in supporting teachers as they connect LETRS to classroom instruction. In addition to regular protected time for teachers to process what they are learning with their colleagues, interviewees reported that instructional coaches and leaders should hold ongoing coaching conversations and ensure that teachers have instructional materials that align with the science of reading.



Our administrators helped us stay on track. We had weekly PDs with them every Tuesday. They met with every single grade level. We had common planning, which I think was really helpful that they worked our schedules out that way. And so that helped us stay on track. We knew which sessions we were going to be discussing, and so you knew you had to have it done before that Tuesday and I found that really valuable.

Supports for Schools

Districts tried to reduce the overall burden on their schools. Districts supported schools implementing LETRS in several ways. The two most often cited by interviewees (district and school administrators from four districts) were coordinating the eight full-day training sessions that take place over the two years of LETRS training and supporting schools in prioritizing the training. Two district administrators spoke of releasing schools from certain other district expectations to take things “off their plate[s].” A school administrator in a third district reported feeling “completely supported” when she declined opportunities to engage her school in district professional development because she wanted her staff to focus on LETRS. Teachers in another district reflected that LETRS was “our big professional development in those years” and they were not asked to do much else. Districts also helped schools by setting expectations for the timeline of the training, usually by providing schools with pacing charts.

Districts allowed schools some flexibility. School and district administrators from three districts discussed ways in which their districts allowed schools some flexibility in implementing the training. Schools going through LETRS were allowed to replace assessments that were not aligned to the science of reading with ones that were and to adopt new instructional resources to help supplement the core curriculum when they discovered a need. In some cases, district benchmark assessments did not align with the pacing of LETRS or the with the progression of the school’s science of reading-aligned curriculum. As the assessment results were not a good representation of student knowledge due to the misalignment, district staff took this into consideration when reviewing data.



I think giving them the flexibility to make it work in their buildings [is helpful]. And I guess not locking them in to saying, hey, your PLC has to be done after school, that you can use it during your planning period. It's up to you to schedule that.

3. Implementation Challenges

A variety of implementation challenges were mentioned throughout the course of the interviews, including minor issues like getting started with the training, pushing through the theory-heavy content of Unit 1 and Unit 2, and correcting misunderstandings among teachers about the training. However, many of the challenges cited by multiple interviewees relate to the time required to complete LETRS training and the intensity of the training workload.

LETRS training requires a significant commitment of time and energy from teachers. The most frequently mentioned challenge among all four types of interviewees was the amount of time completing and implementing LETRS takes—from finding time to complete the training requirements to the time needed to restructure instruction to align with the science of reading. The time teachers commit to LETRS comes on top of their other responsibilities and can be an especially heavy burden for novice teachers and teachers who are expected to also complete other professional development requirements. Teachers who feel overwhelmed may be more likely to take shortcuts like searching for LETRS quiz answers online, reported state literacy specialists. The state’s relatively new unencumbered



I think a lot of the hesitance surrounding the training is, especially when we have to schedule it on a school day and they know that there's going to be a sub in the classroom, or you take a primary school that has K through two and every teacher is required to do LETRS training, you don't have enough staff to compensate for that.

time law providing 30 minutes of duty-free time during the school day was a specific barrier mentioned to embedding professional development, including LETRS, during the workday rather than having teachers complete LETRS work on their own time.

Scheduling the full-day LETRS training sessions could be difficult. Literacy specialists and district administrators and teachers across four districts noted that scheduling the full-day LETRS training sessions could pose a significant challenge, especially in districts that do not have professional development workdays spread throughout the school year. Schools sometimes had to find large numbers of substitute teachers so classroom teachers could complete the full-day training. Not only could this be challenging due to an overall shortage

of substitutes, but it was also costly. Furthermore, completing substitute plans places an additional task on teachers. There was a strong preference among interviewees for placing the full-day training sessions on days when students were not in the building.

LETRS is a heavy lift for administrators. Two district administrators spoke of the time it took to manage LETRS training on a districtwide basis. One administrator in a large district had recently been able to shift some LETRS tasks over to an administrative assistant but estimated that prior to that they were spending half of their work week managing LETRS. Another felt that the workload was currently manageable but expected it to increase significantly in the next year as more teachers completed one of the two volumes of the course, requiring review of their progress and management of the process to get them their state stipend.

Three school administrators expressed difficulty keeping up with their own LETRS training progress, and two were not actively working to complete the training. One said that “all the other things that come with the job and the responsibility,” including being involved as teachers in their building completed LETRS, got in the way. Another said, “[I]t’s too much for an administrator to have to do and run a building right now. So, I fell behind and then I couldn’t get caught up.” A third did not understand that the training had to be completed within a two-year window and paused to focus on completing their dissertation, but now expects to have to start LETRS over.

4. Value of the Training and Impacts to Date

While many interviewees acknowledged that LETRS training is a heavy lift, they agreed that the training provided valuable knowledge and skills and is “worthwhile.” Some interviewees were also able to speak to early impacts they had seen in their classrooms, schools, and districts.

The Value of Training

When asked about the value of LETRS training, responses were overwhelmingly positive. Interviewees saw the training as providing valuable knowledge and skills that could benefit teachers in all grades and with all levels of experience, as well as both district and school administrators. They also reported that the training helped them understand recent changes to ELA curricula and standards.

Interviewees felt that LETRS training was useful and valuable.

Interviewees in all six districts asserted that despite the additional workload LETRS training presented and the time it took to complete, it was “amazing,” “meaningful,” and “very valuable.” One interviewee said, “[I]t has really changed my whole thinking about literacy instruction.” Some noted that the courses they took in their teacher preparation programs on teaching reading were too few and “not enough to... effectively teach students how to read, and diagnose problems, and all that.” LETRS filled an



Interviewee 1: [T]his is my 20th year in education, so I've done a lot of things, a lot of professional development, but as far as teaching and learning goes, this is probably the best thing I've ever done.

Interviewee 2: I have three postgraduate degrees, and this by far has been the best training I have ever had as an educator.

important gap in their toolkit. Even interviewees who had been early elementary teachers and had a good knowledge base for teaching reading reported benefiting from LETRS training. And school administrators, who may have backgrounds ranging from elementary education to high school to physical education, found that going through LETRS training equipped them to recognize good literacy teaching in their buildings and identify classrooms that needed additional instructional support.

LETRS equipped trainees with important skills, tools, and strategies. All four types of interviewees across all six districts agreed that LETRS training provided new tools and strategies they could use in their work and made them more knowledgeable about students' instructional needs. They reported being able to immediately implement strategies they learned from LETRS in the classroom,



[LETRS is] the piece we've been missing in instruction. We knew that... something that wasn't there, and it's the piece that we've been missing...

which a few interviewees noted was somewhat unique about the training compared to other professional development they had received. "[N]ot every PD shows you how to put it into practice," said one teacher.

LETRS also equipped trainees to dig deeply into data to identify students' specific strengths and weaknesses and target instruction and intervention to those skill gaps. One teacher reflected, "LETRS really helps you hone in on the specifics, and then we can work to develop a strategy of solving those issues." As this task often occurs collaboratively during grade-level planning or in professional learning communities (PLCs), interviewees reported that it was helpful that trainees acquired "a common language" for discussing reading instruction and data from LETRS.

Teachers at all levels and with any amount of experience can benefit from LETRS training.

While state legislation now requires all K-3 teachers to complete LETRS training and provides funding for those staff, some of the schools that began training in 2021 were able to train staff in additional roles and grade levels. Fourth and fifth grade teachers, pre-K teachers, and interventionists received LETRS training in four of the seven selected schools each; three schools trained special education teachers, and teaching assistants and ESOL teachers were trained in two schools each.

Interviewees from all six districts reported that LETRS training is beneficial for teachers above the third-grade level. One district administrator noted that there are students at all grade levels who are not proficient in reading. A school administrator said that the training enabled teachers in the upper elementary grades to provide intervention to students and fill skill gaps identified by screeners such as the spelling inventory and the phonics survey provided by LETRS. Teachers explained that LETRS gave them "a deeper understanding of... why some children at the upper grade level still struggled" and enabled them to identify gaps in foundational reading skills, like decoding, that were affecting reading comprehension. Said one school administrator:

I can remember back several years ago where that teacher feedback about professional development was, "We need something that's relevant to what we're doing," and that's no longer the case. They can completely see the relevance, even all the way up through fifth grade where they're not so much working on some of the foundational things that the kindergarten and first-graders are working on.

Interviewees had noticed that novice teachers, who may enter the field with too little preparation for teaching reading, were just “soaking it all in” with respect to the training. One reading coach said she had heard “nothing but positive things” from first year teachers who were enrolled in LETRS, despite them having to stay after school once a week for an extra meeting dedicated to discussing LETRS.

At the same time, interviewees reported that veteran teachers also benefited from the training, especially because their previous knowledge and training may have come from a balanced literacy perspective or been very limited in scope. Even interviewees who were trained in Reading Recovery recognized the value of LETRS. One said, “[D]oing LETRS just helped me solidify my thoughts that yeah, [guessing at words based on pictures] isn’t how we should teach the children to read.” An interviewee who was trained in the Orton-Gillingham Approach noted that while much of the content of LETRS Volume 1 was review for them, Volume 2 contained new content. Even for teachers with years of experience teaching early elementary students, LETRS was described as “another tool in your tool belt... and you can never have enough tools in that tool belt, especially when it comes to reading.”



I think [novice teachers] feel really lucky that they're at the beginning of their career, and they're getting this information because those of us who have taught for 10 plus years, we couldn't help but think, oh my goodness, why did I do that to all those students beforehand?

LETRS training provides administrators with important knowledge. District and school administrators across all six districts agreed that both school and district administrators benefit from LETRS training. Of the six districts selected for interviews, three district administrators had completed or were currently working to complete LETRS, while three had never enrolled. District administrators who did complete the training found that it gave them “tools to support” their schools and teachers, as well as “a common language” to use when talking with educators about reading instruction. One noted that their background was not in early elementary education, so understanding “why things have to come in this order and why you approach teaching things this way” was very helpful.

Several of the school administrators interviewed spoke of being able to apply LETRS to their school settings by collaboratively analyzing school data with teachers and examining the alignment of LETRS to current instructional practices and materials. One noted that they used the strategies they learned from LETRS informally with students and could then talk with teachers about what they saw and what the student needed. All of these tasks would have been difficult without the knowledge gained from LETRS.

LETRS training helped educators understand “the why” behind changes to state-approved ELA curricula and standards and changes they were being asked to make in their instruction.

Teachers and district and school administrators in three districts reported that the knowledge of reading instruction they gained from LETRS training helped to explain why their schools were being required to choose from one of five new state-approved ELA curricula for 2024-25. A school administrator explained that LETRS training helped them validate “the why” behind changes they were asking teachers to make to reading instruction. A district administrator said that LETRS has “really solidified that expectation for structured literacy” in schools and helped the district justify changes to curriculum. One teacher reflected:

I also was thinking as a teacher over the years, you have this gut [feeling] of, I feel like I should be [using practices like those learned from LETRS], but you don't have the background information to say why... at the same time, [trying] it doesn't work perfectly because you don't have that knowledge to say, okay, what went wrong? Why didn't it work? And I think that's what our teachers are saying about LETRS. It's like, oh, it's giving me this information, this background knowledge, this understanding of how it works so then I know how to implement it.

Impacts to Date

The educators interviewed had only recently completed LETRS training—or in some cases, still had a few months of training left. However, researchers asked if they had begun to see any early impacts of the training, whether quantitative or anecdotal. Interviewees were able to report a variety of impacts.

LETRS has increased teachers' sense of efficacy and ability to identify and address students' needs. Interviewees in four of the six districts reported noticing positive impacts to teacher efficacy that they attributed to a combination of LETRS training and other changes that occurred at the same time, like the adoption of new ELA curricula or new screening and intervention tools. Some noted that teachers were more confident in identifying students' needs, differentiating instruction, and reviewing and using curricula. In another four districts, interviewees said that teachers who had taken LETRS were better at using data and observation to identify students' specific learning needs and were able to have much more detailed conversations with colleagues about those needs, in part because they had a common language for discussing reading instruction thanks to LETRS:

[W]e've always had conversations around students and PLCs, that's the whole point. But they're actually now having substantive conversations, not, "Well, Samantha's just not reading. She's just falling more behind." It's actually now people offering up to say, "Well, is it a decoding issue? What are you seeing? Is she struggling to decode text? Or, could she have dyslexia, or another disability?" So those probing questions now, I think because those teachers are now trained, you're getting a much better diagnosis, if you will, of, why can't a student read? Or a group of students, why are they not progressing at the pace we would expect them to do?

LETRS has helped schools examine their instructional materials and assessments and significantly improve third grade ELA SC READY scores. Early school impacts from a combination of LETRS training and changes to curricula and instruction were observed by all four types of interviewees across four of the six districts. These interviewees described schools as already making significant progress toward reducing the percentage of students scoring Does Not Meet on the third grade ELA SC



[W]hen [teachers] come to their meetings, they can talk more about why the student is struggling, what they're seeing, where their gaps are by doing some of the diagnostic tests that we have. We do the PAST with some of our students, but they can drill down and they see what they're having trouble with, and what next steps we can take.



I would say probably after the second [LETRS full-day] session, my teachers were ready to throw out what they were doing and immediately start implementing... best practices that were being taught through the study of LETRS.... it is powerful enough that you know what you're doing is not working and you need to make some changes right then.

READY assessment. One literacy specialist said, “[M]y schools that I supported... there were three schools. They were Tier 3 [PLP] schools. Now all of them, if we redid the evaluation right now, they would be Tier 1 or Tier 2 schools.” Another literacy specialist reported significant reductions in the percentage of third graders scoring DNM in three schools they supported:

- from 65% in 2021 to 45% in 2023;
- from 81% in 2022 to 45% in 2023; and
- from 68% in 2022 to 39% in 2023.

District and school administrators had also noticed significant gains in SC READY scores. One school administrator reflected that in 2021 only 17% of 3rd graders in their school were on grade level in ELA; as of 2023, that number had increased to 43%. The school was previously awarded a “Below Average” rating but was most recently only two points away from being rated “Excellent.”

District and school administrators also reported that LETRS training sometimes prompted both schools and districts to reconsider how their instructional materials and assessments aligned with the science of reading and supported them in their work with students. Some schools recognized a need for supplemental curricula that could fill in gaps in their existing curricula, especially in the area of phonemic awareness. Interviewees felt that LETRS equipped them to have “thoughtful” conversations about how they could find or adapt materials to meet the needs of their students. They also found that current assessments did not always provide the type of data they needed to get a full picture of students’ skills. One district administrator said, “We have district unit assessments that we have created, and through this process [of completing LETRS training], our folks are questioning some of the assessments, so we are going back and revamping those assessments.” Another district administrator had heard teachers express excitement at the opportunity to use assessments provided by Lexia to “get down to the granular part of what the struggle is” for students.

Instruction based in the science of reading has had noticeable impacts on students’ reading skills and proficiency. Many interviewees offered insight into specific ways in which students were already being impacted by changes to instruction. Improvements in screening and district benchmark scores were observed by teachers and school and district administrators in four districts. They reported decreases in the number of students identified as “high risk” by their universal reading screener, improvements in phonological awareness, phonics, and vocabulary scores on universal screening, and significant gains in screening scores between the beginning of the year and mid-year administrations. One school administrator said that while the “vast majority” of kindergartners were considered at high risk or some risk of reading difficulties at the beginning of the year based on their universal reading screener, at the midyear administration only six students were identified as being at high risk and three at some risk.

School administrators and teachers in three districts also noted improvements to students' general reading ability. Several teachers in a school that still used reading levels reflected that their current students—even those with the lowest reading level in the class—were at much higher levels than students in the past. One teacher said that all of her students were currently on grade level in reading. A school administrator reported that, for the first time ever, they have no third graders performing below the district ELA cut score that indicates they are at risk of being retained. They added, “We know that’s because of our LETRS training and the shift of our curriculum to match what we learned in LETRS.” A district administrator noted that kindergarteners in schools that had implemented LETRS were entering first grade with higher readiness levels than in the past. Because students had stronger reading skills, two school administrators reported that fewer students in their schools require intervention support and those who do often need it for less time. One said, “I’m already seeing [instruction based on the science of reading] pay off in the number of kids that need intervention all year long. You used to have a kid and they were in intervention all year. That’s not the case now.”



[T]eachers were killing themselves trying to [provide] small group [intervention] in the classroom, when we just needed to make a shift in our tier one instruction and how we were doing that. And we've seen that shift take place and we're seeing the benefits of it.

A few interviewees also noted that they have observed higher student engagement since aligning instruction to LETRS and the science of reading and have seen students use skills and strategies from LETRS in the classroom. Teachers in one school reported that their students “love small groups” because of the new activities that teachers have implemented to teach foundational reading skills.

Some student subgroups may benefit from LETRS-aligned instruction even more than their peers. All four types of interviewees across three districts observed that changes to instruction had especially profound impacts on specific student subgroups, including multilingual learners, the lowest-performing quintile of students, and students with disabilities. Students in all of these groups were experiencing greater than normal growth now that instruction was aligned with LETRS and the science of reading, according to interviewees. Several interviewees had seen multilingual learners—even those who had recently come to the United States—make much faster gains in English language acquisition and their ability to engage in English-language instruction than they would have in past years. One teacher described the growth she had seen in some of her multilingual learner students as “phenomenal.” All of these reports were anecdotal, though one literacy specialist noted that the Office of Special Education Services is tracking data on the improved achievement of students with disabilities.

5. Needs, Suggestions, and Advice for Future Trainees

The needs expressed by interviewees, suggestions they provided regarding changes the SCDE might consider related to LETRS training, and the advice interviewees had for educators across the state who have not yet started LETRS are summarized below. These findings effectively serve as recommendations for the SCDE and for educators across the state whose schools and districts are beginning LETRS training in August 2024.

Needs and Suggestions

Interviewees expressed a variety of needs and offered suggestions for the state to consider as LETRS training and other changes to reading instruction expand statewide. These needs and suggestions relate to the training itself, who receives training, assistance implementing the knowledge and skills gained from the training, having opportunities to provide input to the SCDE, and changes to teacher preparation to support the sustainability of the science of reading in South Carolina.

Make the format of full-day LETRS training sessions more flexible and prioritize in-person

sessions. Teachers and administrators from four districts had suggestions regarding the format of LETRS training, which requires eight full-day training sessions over the course of two years in addition to independent work. Several felt that in-person full-day training sessions were more effective and engaging than virtual training. Others expressed a desire for more flexibility in the length of those sessions, with ideas including:

- Splitting the full-day sessions into shorter, weekly or biweekly meetings that could be held after school;
- Shortening the full-day sessions by 25-50%; and
- Allowing schools to split full-day sessions into two half-day sessions while still holding the training in person (which Lexia currently does not allow, according to one interviewee).

Extend LETRS training beyond teachers in grades K-3. Three district administrators felt that all elementary teachers from pre-K up to 5th grade need LETRS training. One noted,

I think because we have not had the phonics before in the district that we do need to go ahead and train [grades] 4 and 5 for who's sitting there now, because those kids can't read... we are seeing there is a need to educate the teachers until we get a solid [ELA] program, and it feeds up.



I really think the directors of elementary education that are in these district level positions need to be taking LETRS. It is unfair for them to be making curriculum decisions and big generalization decisions and not have this background because the person that suffers is the teacher trying to figure out how to work that in... [i]t's not just for classroom teachers.

Literacy specialists expressed that district administrators also needed to be trained, because “there’s a knowledge gap... sometimes we’re having this delay where our PLP schools know better practices and what the higher ups are looking for isn’t aligning.”

Provide schools starting LETRS with guidance and exemplars to help them implement the training well.

Teachers and school and district administrators across three districts wished they had had more guidance at the start of training regarding what implementation should look like and the format and timeline of training, including the fact that course access would only last two years. One school administrator recommended creating a “mini session” that would explain to trainees “what they’re about to embark on.” Another reported that they did not receive a pacing guide for the training, though they noted that it could have been given to the district and not passed on. A district administrator said that the SCDE now had guidance recommending that principals meet with trainees

and have regular conversations about LETRS modules, but that guidance did not exist when their schools started the training.

Support schools and districts in aligning curriculum, standards, instruction, and instructional materials with the science of reading. New ELA standards, the adoption of new ELA curricula, and the expansion of LETRS statewide present huge, simultaneous changes for educators. Two district administrators expressed a need for help merging these changes “so that [LETRS] is not one separate thing,” but rather part of the larger endeavor to ensure that all South Carolina students have the opportunity to be proficient readers. Another was working to integrate existing resources like leveled readers that could still be used in some ways—for example, in read alouds or reading comprehension instruction—with new instructional materials and practices that are aligned with the science of reading. They felt strongly that it was unnecessary to simply throw out old materials but expressed that they had not yet found “that balance” between old and new resources.

Provide opportunities for school and district leaders to give input regarding implementation of LETRS. One district administrator appreciated the opportunity to discuss the LETRS initiative during regular statewide roundtable meetings attended by district instructional leaders and SCDE leaders. They



[LETRS] really needs to be the reading methods course at every college. If colleges started with this as their methods course, then we wouldn't have to be making up the slack for it for our teachers [with] professional development. We could then be supporting them with now taking those little things that they're doing in LETRS and building professional development off those.

advised that the SCDE should listen closely to feedback during these meetings and approach them as opportunities to get input from district leaders, which they thought would both help the SCDE and increase buy-in from districts. A school administrator saw an ongoing need for the SCDE to bring together reading coaches and leaders from schools that have already completed LETRS to share what worked for them, and then use that information to improve support for trainees who will start LETRS in August 2024 and beyond.

Ensure that institutions of higher education shift teacher preparation to cover the science of reading. Literacy specialists, school administrators, and teachers from three districts expressed disappointment that many teachers currently enter the classroom without the knowledge and skills they receive from LETRS training, saying, “This should be a college course, so when we’re first year teachers, we know all this.” They also recognized that the flow of new

teachers who lack a strong knowledge base in teaching reading into classrooms across the state must be stemmed in order for the push for instruction aligned with the science of reading to be sustainable. A literacy specialist pointed out:

“It's just not feasible to continue [training new teachers using LETRS] money-wise or time-wise... they've just gone through school... And sometimes we have year one teachers who already have enough on their plate and now we're adding basically college courses to them. And if higher ed was shifting and supporting [to be] more aligned with science of reading... that would alleviate so much of all the challenges we're experiencing in our schools.”

Advice for Beginning LETRS

Depending on their role, interviewees were asked if they had any advice for districts or schools that had not yet started LETRS training. The key themes in their responses are described below.

Hold each other accountable and pace yourself so you do not

fall behind. LETRS is a two-year endeavor, with video modules and a significant amount of reading that must be completed throughout the two years in addition to a total of eight full-day training sessions. The most common piece of advice, offered by teachers and district and school administrators across five districts, was for trainees to ensure that they stay on top of the independent work of LETRS by pacing themselves carefully and not “waiting until the last minute”—right before the full-day unit training—to complete the work. Teachers found pacing guides and binders containing the Bridge to Practice activities helpful for pacing themselves. Some interviewees also recommended that teachers “find a buddy” or “have an accountability partner in the building” to help them stay on track. They found it helpful for accountability when the teachers and administrator in a school went through the training together and had regular discussions about the training material.



[O]ur afterschool cohorts, I know every school might not be like ours, but it was just a time to focus on LETRS and not anything else and it just helped, and to meet every single week... it was the accountability part of the discussion. It was the help. It was everything. I think that was the biggest thing.

Approach LETRS with an open and positive mindset.

Interviewees from all four roles across five districts agreed that the mindset with which trainees approach LETRS is important, and fostering a positive mindset is helpful for the success of LETRS. One literacy specialist wanted teachers and administrators across the state to realize that “this is a gift, and not just a mandate.” Several teachers encouraged future trainees to “have an open mind” and include new strategies learned from LETRS as part of their regular small group instruction with students so “it’s not like extra work, it’s just part of what you do.” A district administrator noted that “[LETRS is] not just one more thing, and [teachers]



[LETRS] is a gift, and not just a mandate.

have to see that this training is going to benefit them in the classroom. It’s not just a bunch of paperwork they’re doing...” The overarching takeaway from these pieces of advice is that LETRS is not just a one-time professional development initiative—it is intended to bring about a permanent and positive change to how schools across the state teach reading.

Have a plan, be strategic, and take care of the logistics ahead of time.

Across four districts and all four roles, interviewees recommended that those new to LETRS have a carefully considered plan for implementing the training. They said plans should be strategic and include scheduling and arranging the logistics of the full-day trainings such that trainees can work together as grade level teams and/or as a school. Plans should also designate regular time for teachers to focus on LETRS—for example, by setting aside a portion of already-scheduled PLC time or establishing a weekly meeting after school. It was also suggested that these plans make LETRS strategies part of the administrator’s walkthrough process.

“Make sure they front load and make sure they have that plan and all the logistical things taken care of



[D]istricts might want to think about professional development on a more quarterly [basis]. They tend to put a bunch in the beginning and then some at the end, but that doesn't really help sustain throughout the year. In [my district], our work days and early release days are on Fridays, and there's no way that I could ask staff to take up LETRS on a Friday afternoon. They would kill me.

so when they roll it out to their teachers, it won't be so inundating and so heavy on their shoulders," said one literacy specialist.

Several interviewees noted the importance of careful scheduling of the full-day sessions, both at the district level and the school level. Said one school administrator, "[I]f this is something that the state is going to push, or the district is going to push, then you really need to be making a calendar that supports it." A district administrator reflected that they "get the most pushback" from school leaders who question, "[H]ow am I supposed to make this happen in my school?" The administrator felt that the district implementation schedule needed to be "functional for teachers, for students, and for building leaders." A teacher reported that the following approach their school took to implementing the training was helpful: "[T]aking it one step at a time, having a plan, and little bites. This is our plan, these are our goals for this week, we know what's coming up, what we're going to read, how we're going to discuss it." Teachers also spoke of the value

of building leaders identifying time already built into the school day to support LETRS implementation and minimize the amount of time they needed to spend after school.

Complete LETRS as a group to facilitate collaboration and togetherness. School administrators and teachers in four districts reported that working together with their colleagues and administrators on the training was valuable. They especially valued opportunities to regularly discuss LETRS together, and some said that this togetherness helped them push through the first two units of LETRS, which they described as very dense and theory-heavy. Completing the training together also helped school teams apply what they were learning to their particular school context. One administrator reflected on the full-day sessions at her school:

We all sat in the media center at our school and everybody was spread out... But then when it was time to collaborate, that was most meaningful because we were able to really have those in depth conversations about us, and make it alignment (sic.) with us, and make it more meaningful to what's happening in our building... we even tried it where teachers were in... different areas of the building, and then it was time for that collaborative session, and then we came back. So, everyone still had their learning throughout the lessons. But that collaboration piece was priceless.

Principals should lead by example as they and teachers in their schools complete LETRS training. As was already reported as a success factor, teachers and school and district administrators in three districts said that buy-in from building leadership is critical for



I know we have some schools that are doing it self-paced where everybody has to do it on their own. I just do not see how they're getting out of it what they need to get out of it, because like I said, just pulling those one or two videos a week, having discussion about what we were seeing that teacher do was a huge piece. And I would highly recommend that whoever goes through it has some type of discussion versus the self-paced.

LETRS training to be successful. According to interviewees, buy-in means leaders are not just completing the training along with their teachers, but also taking the role of “lead learner” as staff go through LETRS together. It means they are “holding themselves accountable” and being “vulnerable and transparent and honest.” This kind of leadership and school culture can make a difference between staff who go through the motions of completing LETRS and staff who believe that it is something worth putting significant effort into. Several teachers mentioned this; for example:

I know... our principal went through it with us and [the school's reading coach] at the same time. We were doing it together, and that was very helpful. It means a lot that they're doing the same work that we are doing, and we weren't being told to just do it, they were with us and on the same board and they could learn from what we were doing in the classroom too, because they weren't as directly hands-on in their position. So just knowing that they had been there and done it and I know that our state superintendent, she has done it too, and that means a lot. So she's not asking us to do something that she won't do, and that means a lot.

Another teacher in the same school added, “It's just nice when someone walks in your shoes, it just makes you feel very supported, and it gives you that drive to keep moving forward.”



The principal has to do this with the teachers, 100%. They have to be involved in it. They have to attend the meetings, they have to do the modules, they have to do the test. They have to be vulnerable and transparent and honest... if you're not willing to be there with them to go through it, then you're going to get what you put into it.

Appendix A: Methodology

At the request of the SCDE, in 2023-24, researchers at the RC6 conducted interviews and focus groups to gather perspectives from educators who began LETRS training in 2021-22 and state literacy specialists who provide support to PLP schools. The SCDE and the RC6 began by collaboratively selecting one school in each of five districts to represent the diversity of the state in terms of location, size, demographics, and socio-economic status. Four were Tier 2 or Tier 3 PLP schools. One school was Tier 1 (non-PLP), with just under 33% of students scoring DNM, but had requested and received funding to train its entire staff using LETRS beginning in August 2021. A sixth PLP school was also included in the interviews and focus groups due to a mix-up in communication. An additional district was identified later in the process to gain further representation from large districts, and a seventh school was identified within that district.

The SCDE identified the district staff member in charge of LETRS implementation in each of the six districts and requested that they participate in an interview about their experience with LETRS. The principal of each identified school was also interviewed and was asked to select teachers for a focus group to capture their experiences as well. To form each focus group, the principals were asked to identify teachers from a cross representation of grade levels who had participated in the LETRS training and implementation at their school. One school principal was non-responsive and teachers at the school identified later in the process were not asked to participate in a focus group due to time constraints.

In total, the RC6 project team conducted interviews with five state literacy specialists, six district leaders, and seven principals, as well as five teacher focus groups consisting of 26 teachers, school reading coaches, and interventionists in January-March of 2024. All interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams.

Researchers analyzed the interview notes and transcripts and identified key themes to help present a clear picture of educators' experiences with LETRS implementation across the state. While the findings outlined in this brief present a "window" into LETRS implementation in South Carolina, they should be interpreted with the understanding that they represent input from a small number of educators in a relatively small number of districts and schools statewide.