

The science of reading undergirds Georgia's new literacy-education laws

by Rebecca Grapevine | Apr 21, 2023 | Capitol Beat News Service



ATLANTA – Georgia is gearing up to implement a new approach to teaching reading in the early grades.

Gov. Brian Kemp recently signed into law two [literacy bills](#) passed during this year's legislative session.

About 36% of Georgia third graders read below grade level, according to the state's [2022 Milestones test results](#), and around 17% of the state's adults [lack basic literacy skills](#).

The new laws aim at improving those numbers by introducing two related approaches to literacy instruction: "the science of reading" and "structured literacy."

"Science of reading is sort of a relatively new term that bundles together ... the role and necessity of systematic instruction on phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency as well as comprehension and vocabulary," said [Sarah Woulfin](#), an associate professor at the College of Education at the University of Texas-Austin.

"It's become a kind of streamlined way to talk about evidence-based reading instruction in an effort to change reading instruction in one particular direction."

"Structured literacy," as defined by one of the new literacy laws, refers to an "evidence-based approach to teaching oral and written language ... characterized by explicit, systematic, cumulative, and diagnostic instruction."

The new law names six specific topics of focus: phonology, sound-symbol association, syllable instruction, morphology, syntax, and semantics.

"The idea is giving guardrails and a strategic mindset to how literacy instruction is delivered," said Matt Smith, director of policy and research at the [Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education](#) (GPEE).

"We're talking about making reading instruction in the early grades more systematic. ... There's a process. You screen and identify the students that have reading deficits."

Many of these ideas have been around for decades and are already included in Georgia's education standards. The new laws, however, mandate that school districts use evidence-backed approaches and aim to ensure consistent adoption across the state.

That's key to ensuring educational equity, proponents of the approach argue.

"Literacy is the social justice issue of our time, and the science of reading is our best tool to accomplish that," said Ramona Brown, a science of reading professional development coach at the [Rollins Center for Language and Literacy](#) at the Atlanta Speech School.

"It is helpful for all students and harmful to none, and ... through these approaches, 95% of children will learn how to read whether they are here in Atlanta or they are in Crisp County."

"For a majority of kids in our country, whether you have dyslexia or whether you have experienced generational lack of access to opportunity, or you speak English as a second language ... what we see from research is that an overwhelming majority of children require explicit instruction," added Ryan Lee-James, chief academic officer at the [Atlanta Speech School](#).

"The explicit nature of the teaching means that we're not leaving things to chance or for you to figure out on your own."

The lofty literacy goals found in the new legislation will need to be backed by careful implementation at the district and school levels to produce results.

"There really needs to be a lot of systems and supports and resources in place so that people can have the time and space to learn about these approaches to be developed," said Woulfin, the University of Texas professor.

"If you don't have the aligned professional learning opportunities for teachers and principals, so that everyone has time and space to learn about

these new curricular materials, to try out these new instructional approaches, at the end of the day, classroom practice is not going to change.”

“There is an opportunity for this to go really well with different pieces collaborating and interfacing together,” Smith added. “But there is another kind of concern, which is that there is a lot going on, and so we have to keep our eye on the ball because a lot of different things are going to be going on at the same time.”

One of the newly signed laws creates a literacy council made up of legislators, educators, and experts. Smith said that could be helpful in ensuring a unified approach and keeping things on track.

“I’m glad that both laws passed at the same time because I think it’ll be mutually beneficial for both in terms of strategy, public messaging around literacy, [and] also around the scientific evidence-based components of reading,” he said.

Funding is another possible obstacle to the success of the initiative. The early literacy bill did not have specific funds in the budget earmarked for it. It’s possible that additional funds could be allocated to the measure during next year’s legislative session.

Without the funding, the measure is like “an unfunded mandate,” said John Zauner, executive director of the Georgia [School Superintendents Association](#). He said that when Mississippi sought to turn around its poor literacy rate, the state backed the effort with millions of dollars, something that is currently lacking in Georgia.

“We always need resources in order to teach reading effectively,” added Lisa Morgan, president of the [Georgia Association of Educators](#). “We need books in our classroom that are engaging on a variety of levels.”

“We need to be providing our students with much more than just the standard textbook. ... The books that we have in our classrooms need to

reflect the diversity of our students in the world.”

When Chattahoochee County implemented a science of reading approach, it took a large commitment of resources, said Kristie Brooks, [the district's superintendent](#).

“It's been a heavy lift financially. And it's also a heavy lift, time-commitment wise,” Brooks said. “We have had two-and-a-half years of intense training and coaching and classroom modeling. It was so important that it was done correctly.”

Brooks said the investment has been worth it for her district.

“We have been just so pleased with the work that we have seen,” she said.

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