

2016



STRONG READERS = STRONG LEADERS

**Mississippi Turns
Literacy-Based Promotion Act
for Third Graders
Into Action**



**MISSISSIPPI
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION**

Ensuring a bright future for every child



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) and its Office of Elementary Education and Reading are pleased to release *Strong Readers = Strong Leaders: Mississippi Turns Literacy-Based Promotion Act for Third Graders Into Action*. The vision of the Mississippi Board of Education is to create a world-class educational system that gives students the knowledge and skills to be successful in college and the workforce and to flourish as parents and citizens. Strong literacy skills are critical for Mississippi students to succeed academically as well as to prosper in the current global economy. Students must be able to read, write, and think at increasingly higher levels of complexity, creativity, and sophistication to prepare for college and career pathways (Zhao, 2009).

This document is the result of intense collaboration between the Southeast Comprehensive Center (SECC) and the MDE. The two entities have worked together to identify and examine many of the initiatives implemented in response to the Mississippi Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA), and this document provides an overview of these initiatives.

The MDE would like to acknowledge the teachers, school principals, and district administrators who so readily gave their time to be interviewed. The MDE also wishes to thank districts that have participated in the Educator in Residence (EIR) model, according to which EIRs remain employed by their school districts but serve as state literacy coaches for MDE. The MDE would also like to acknowledge the school district policymakers, administrators, and staff who are already carrying out policies and procedures that promote best practices in increasing the reading skills of all students in Mississippi as well as those district officials and staff who are preparing to strengthen their literacy efforts by implementing policies and practices such as the ones outlined in this publication. In addition, the cover photo for this report is courtesy of MDE.

American Institutes for Research (AIR), which administers the SECC, and the SECC team would like to acknowledge and extend thanks to the following staff for supporting this important work and developing the report:

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This document reports findings from an exploratory examination of initiatives that the Mississippi Department of Education advanced in response to Mississippi's Literacy-Based Promotion Act of 2013 (LBPA) (see Appendix A for information on the LBPA). The LBPA focuses on raising standards to improve reading skills of kindergarten through third-grade (K–3) students and to ensure that third-grade students are proficient in reading. As part of the MDE's strategic planning process, the department requested assistance from its federal regional comprehensive center, the U.S. Department of Education-funded Southeast Comprehensive Center, which is administered by AIR. The MDE's request was for the SECC to assist with the preparation of a report highlighting important developments in its implementation of literacy initiatives related to the LBPA. SECC staff utilized techniques in qualitative research methodology to identify and examine information for preparation of this report; a summary of these approaches appears in the following section.

Summary of Methodology

Approach: The period between the passing of the LBPA and the implementation of strategies for addressing the specifications of the law was not sufficient for conducting a full evaluation of the impact or outcome of initiatives the MDE implemented in response to the LBPA. Therefore, SECC staff sought to determine the important developments of the department's implementation of literacy initiatives related to the LBPA by applying techniques in qualitative research to gather interview, observation, and extant data from a team of stakeholders in Mississippi. This report is the result of the findings that emerged from these data, and provides a description, not an evaluation, of actions and state-, district-, and school-level initiatives to address the LBPA.

Guiding Question and Data Collection: To develop this report, SECC staff utilized findings from data resulting from interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations as well as extant data from the MDE. SECC staff collected the interview and focus group data, using protocols that contained questions reflecting the LBPA and the MDE's initiatives in response to the act. The guiding question that advanced the collection of data was "What are the important developments of the agency's implementation of literacy initiatives related to the LBPA?" The protocol questions varied, depending on the type of respondent (e.g., teacher, principal, coach). SECC staff also created a classroom observation tool with information for researchers to capture regarding teacher implementation of best practices, as (a) determined by prevailing research and evidence and (b) promoted through the MDE's professional development (PD) for teachers. In addition, SECC staff reviewed documents produced or used by MDE to support implementation efforts.

SECC education experts conducted the observations and interviews in four elementary schools and in two MDE area centers, which the MDE selected on the basis of several variability criteria and the level of implementation of the LBPA. Across these schools and centers, these SECC staff observed 16 classrooms: 2 kindergartens, 4 first grades, 3 second grades, and 7 third grades. In total, SECC staff interviewed 71 respondents: 26 teachers; 14 lead teachers, assistant principals, and principals; 12 district staff; and 19 state staff, including literacy coaches. (See Appendix B for a breakdown of interviewees and roles.)

Data Analysis and Reporting: Review of the data from these activities involved content analyses and other best practices in qualitative research analysis, such as systematically organizing the total data into themes, categories, and propositions suitable for reporting. The findings reported in this document are a composite of these themes, categories, and propositions, with the observation and document review data serving as triangulation measures for verifying, or confirming, interviewee statements and for supporting the integrity of the results selected for inclusion in this report.

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of Mississippi’s adoption of the Literacy-Based Promotion Act nearly three years ago, educators are seeing important signs of progress in children’s literacy. Lawmakers overwhelmingly passed the legislation to raise kindergarten through third grade (K–3) reading standards and require that third graders demonstrate proficiency in reading as a prerequisite for entry into the fourth grade. Governor Phil Bryant signed the bill into law in April 2013. The MDE’s charge was to develop and implement strategies to address the specifications of the LBPA. These strategies include rigorous approaches to teaching literacy, extensive reporting to parents and the public on the MDE’s efforts and student outcomes, PD and strategic coaching for all teachers, and intensive support to a diverse range of students.

KEY ACTIONS

- ✓ Instituting mechanisms that address the legislative mandate and catalyze organizational change
- ✓ Implementing research-based interventions and practices
- ✓ Examining promising practices and noticeable changes

The MDE organized a team of department leaders to oversee the job of fulfilling the legislation. The team devised and led a communication campaign to inform stakeholders about the department’s plan. The MDE staff marshaled resources and developed guides to help school administrators, teachers, and parents understand and participate in the literacy improvement efforts. The MDE staff established a multitiered, critical network of literacy experts (i.e., the state literacy director, state literacy coordinator, three assistant state coordinators, 13 regional coordinators, and 74 recently hired literacy coaches¹) to begin the process of building the skills of classroom teachers. The MDE held to the highest standards for hiring and training literacy coaches, while minimizing bureaucratic obstacles through innovative approaches to supervision and budgeting.

Targeted districts and school administrators have taken up the initiative, ensuring extensive training, dedicating instructional and planning time for teachers, and engaging parents and businesses. Teachers say they appreciate the support they have received to provide more focused instruction based on what, research shows, works; they also appreciate the assistance they have received to leverage performance data to tailor lessons to individual students’ needs. In short, preliminary indicators show that the literacy climate is changing for the better. These indicators also show that the path to substantial improvement in reading proficiency will be tough. For example, the MDE must stretch limited existing funding while searching out new sources of support. Coaches and classroom teachers must set proficiency standards to build excellence and

¹ This group of experts was not established immediately in 2013 but has grown to this number over the past 2½ years.

create strong readers without making these benchmarks unachievable. In addition, schools and teachers must focus on third-grade literacy performance, while not losing sight of what happens in earlier and subsequent grades and in other subjects.

As Mississippi continues its implementation of the LBPA, other states that have a similar law or are considering enacting such laws have begun to look to Mississippi for guidance. Literacy leaders in Colorado, Florida, Ohio, Tennessee, and South Carolina have called on Mississippi's literacy team. The team's contributions include feedback and guidance on the implementation of the statewide PD system, the state's coaching model, school/district literacy plan development, use of the read-at-home plan, and communication about the law to stakeholders.

Promising practices and signs of momentum are emerging as the state takes on the literacy challenge; it will be up to policymakers, strong leaders (state, district superintendents, principals, teachers, and instructional coaches), students, parents, and the broader community—to coalesce and keep the literacy train moving toward higher achievement. Indeed, developing strong readers requires concerted efforts from strong leaders. The state's future depends on it.

Organization of This Report

This report has three major sections, which reflect the actions taken by the MDE in relation to the mandates of the LPBA. Section 1 of the report presents the purposeful mechanisms the MDE has implemented to address the mandates of the legislation and catalyze organizational change. This discussion is followed by Section 2, which highlights the MDE's implementation of research-based practices—a key requirement of the LBPA. Section 3 provides a discussion of some practices that interviewees have identified as noteworthy or promising. A Conclusion, References, and two appendices complete this report.

INSTITUTING PURPOSEFUL MECHANISMS THAT ADDRESS LEGISLATIVE MANDATE AND CATALYZE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Context for the Mississippi Literacy-Based Promotion Act

The LBPA contains an array of critical and complex provisions, requiring the MDE to institute extensive changes that affect parents, students, teachers, principals, and state and district administrators. In essence, each member of the teaching and learning team has assumed important responsibilities derived from the legislation and driven by the MDE actions. A review of the LBPA shows that it aims to do the following:

- Prohibit social promotion in Mississippi schools.
- Improve the reading skills of students in kindergarten through third grade.
- Help ensure that student progression depends, in part, on reading proficiency.
- Help ensure that local school boards' policies facilitate student reading proficiency.
- Ensure that parents and legal guardians² are informed of their child(ren)'s literacy progress.

² The law specifies that parents/guardians receive a letter indicating their child's status.

The LBPA also reflects recognition that extenuating circumstances may exist for certain students (i.e., those eligible for good-cause exemption), whose best interest would be served by promotion to the fourth grade, even without passing the third-grade, end-of-year, assessment. Schools may apply for a good-cause exemption for a student who has not passed this assessment. The parents are included in making this decision, and schools are required to provide specialized reading assistance to students being retained and/or promoted for good cause.

The MDE has responded to the provisions outlined in the LBPA by instituting purposeful mechanisms that address the specifications and promote organizational change. Exhibit 1 shows all the legislative specifications that the MDE has addressed.

Exhibit 1. Legislative Specifications Addressed by MDE	
Legislative specifications	Addressed
§ 37-177-3. Written notification to parent or guardian of determination of reading deficiency	✓ ^a
§ 37-177-5. Establishment of Mississippi Reading Panel; purpose; composition	✓
§ 37-177-7. Selection of schools for reading intervention program; supervisory position in each school responsible for implementation of reading intervention program	✓
§ 37-177-9. Assignment of grade level based on student’s age or other social promotion prohibited; promotion to Grade 4 prohibited unless reading deficiency remedied before end of Grade 3	✓
§ 37-177-11. Good-cause exemption for promotion to Grade 4 of student not meeting academic requirements	✓ ^a
§ 37-177-13. Actions required of school districts for Grade 3 students not promoted to Grade 4	✓ ^a
§ 37-177-15. Intensive acceleration class for certain students	✓
§ 37-177-17. Annual report regarding student progression and student retention and promotion	✓
§ 37-177-19. MDE implementation of chapter (adopt stated policies; provide technical assistance [TA] and training to teachers and administrators)	✓
§ 37-177-21. Legislative appropriation (to provide for teacher training, instructional materials, remedial education training, and administration of an intensive literacy curriculum shall be subject to legislative appropriation)	✓

^a MDE with local school districts

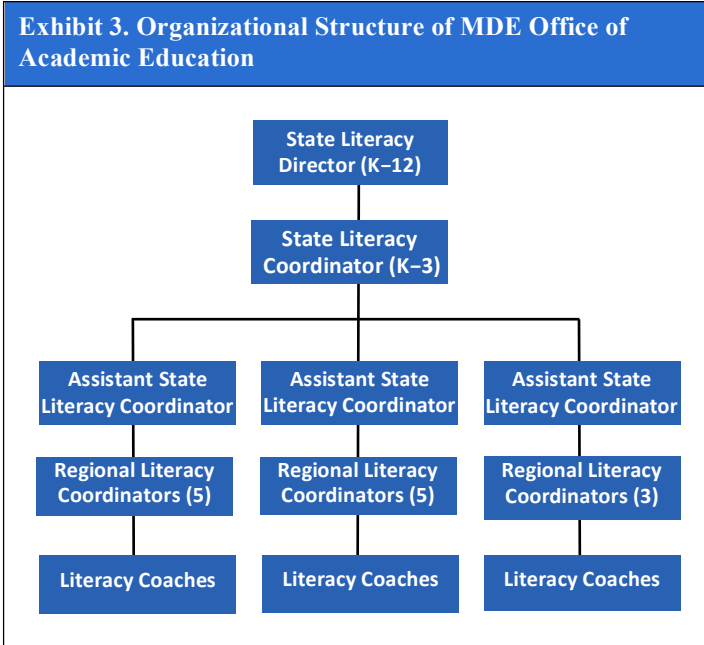
The LBPA reflected several critical provisions and called for a meaningful response from MDE to institute broadscale changes with implications for various members of the teaching–learning context, as is noted above. In essence, each member of the teaching and learning team assumed important responsibilities—derived from the legislation and driven by MDE actions for determining and providing for students not transitioning to fourth grade. These are illustrated in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2. Stakeholder Actions Aligned With Legislative Provisions for Students’ Transition From Third to Fourth Grade				
Student	Parents/Guardians	Administrators	Teachers	Principals
Given: Student does not transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4 unless reading deficiency is remedied in Grade 3.	✓ Receive written notification from school about child’s status. ✓ Engage in parent–child home literacy plan.	✓ Institute statewide policies reflecting the legislative mandates. (MDE) ✓ Establish Mississippi Reading Panel. (MDE) ✓ Select schools for reading coach assignment. (MDE) ✓ Create supervisory position in each school responsible for implementation of reading intervention program.	✓ Support students in intensive acceleration class. ✓ Receive intensive PD and coaching. ✓ Interface with parents	✓ Approve written notification to parents/guardians. ✓ Prohibit grade- or age-based promotion. ✓ Process good-cause exemptions and promotion

Exhibit 2. Stakeholder Actions Aligned With Legislative Provisions for Students' Transition From Third to Fourth Grade

Student	Parents/Guardians	Administrators	Teachers	Principals
		(Local Education Agency [LEA]) ✓ Implement intensive acceleration class. (LEA) ✓ Notify public of results. (LEA) ✓ Provide teacher and administrator PD, TA, and materials. (MDE and LEA) ✓ Procurement of tools for assessing and promoting reading (e.g., Renaissance Learning, which includes the STAR reading assessment for progress monitoring and Accelerated Reader for promoting independent reading). (MDE and LEA)	regarding children's needs and strengths. ✓ Become high-performing teachers.	prohibition. ✓ Support implementation of intensive acceleration class. ✓ Support teacher training and PD.

The legislation implicitly calls for broadscale collaboration among individuals at the state, district, and school levels, and those residing in students' homes. In response, over the past 24 months, the MDE has developed an academic office, which has been instrumental in designing and instituting the statewide literacy initiative. Dr. Kim Benton, MDE's chief academic officer, along with Dr. Nathan Oakley, executive director of the Office of Elementary Education and Reading, were instrumental in coordinating the efforts of MDE's core team of staff to shape the direction of the department's implementation of the LBPA. Part of Dr. Benton's work includes bringing the department's goals (i.e., building school and district capacity in reading) to fruition and advancing the capacity of teachers and parents to support the promotion of third graders to the fourth grade. The core team comprises five key staff members in the MDE academic office. This new organizational structure appears in Exhibit 3.



Staff in the academic office include the state literacy director, Dr. Kymyona Burk, who leads the state's K-12 literacy efforts and oversees the literacy staff in their implementation of the LBPA. The staff includes the state literacy coordinator, Dr. Tenette Smith, who directs K-3 literacy efforts: three assistant state literacy coordinators, who provide resources and professional guidance to regional coordinators, and 13 regional coordinators who support the professional growth of the literacy coaches and also serve as coaches. The next section describes the mechanisms, strategies, and tools instituted by this team to help promote organizational change.

Mechanisms, Strategies, and Tools for Promoting Organizational Change

The LBPA prompted the MDE to assess its own organizational context and structure to determine needs and strengths, since these would affect the successful implementation of mechanisms, strategies, and tools for shaping the teaching and learning of reading. The results of the MDE’s self-assessment showed that it needed to obtain the necessary expertise to build internal capacity and shape organizational changes.

Exploring Emerging Strengths and Needs

MDE requested that SECC conduct an exploratory review of the department’s purposefully implemented initiative—to help refine and target strategies and mechanisms.

A few important aspects of these changes are the development of a “Reading Office,³” the hiring and reassignment of staff with knowledge of the research and teaching practices underlying early literacy development, and the use of progress-monitoring data to set goals and create appropriate lessons and effective training of staff. Essentially, key overall changes at the MDE that directly relate to the mandates of the LBPA include the following:

- Development and implementation of new processes and procedures at state and local levels
- Hiring and training of state- and local-level staff, as well as the provision of literacy toolkits and other literacy-enhancing resources
- Selection of the appropriate schools for implementing reading-based literacy initiatives (according to criteria stipulated by the LBPA)
- Capacity building through procurement of external literacy training providers to deliver PD to teachers and administrators
- Establishment of a tiered network of literacy coaches

All these actions took varying shapes at the state, district, and school levels. The next section illustrates the reflection of these key actions and initiatives at these varying organizational levels.

Key Actions and Initiatives in the State, Districts, and Schools

As summarized above, the MDE implemented key actions and initiatives at the state, district, and school levels to provide support to the full hierarchy of staff who would be responsible for supporting K–3 reading efforts. The next section describes the state-level actions and initiatives, which are followed by those of the districts and then those of the schools.

³ A key term used by the chief academic officer, Dr. Kim Benton. The Reading Office is a part of the Office of Elementary Education and Reading (OEER). It is made up of a director of literacy for K–12 (new position), a coordinator of K–3 reading, and staff as outlined in Exhibit 3. Support for this work has also been provided by the director of Intervention Services, the Early Childhood director (both within the OEER), and the executive director of Professional Development.

State-Level Actions and Initiatives

■ The MDE devises a strategy to provide technical assistance for reading instruction.

The MDE staff members studied the LBPA and drew on their own experience and professional judgment to identify an approach to advance teacher knowledge and skills in literacy. In addition, the MDE staff created a hybrid professional learning design, using standards from Learning Forward (2011). The strategy called for full-day, large-group, face-to-face trainings in the early reading components, as well as continuous school or small-group trainings or individual supports by school-based literacy coaches.

Professional Development Design 1

(Through MDE large-group training)

- ✓ **Purpose:** To increase knowledge of the components of early literacy

Professional Development Design 2

(Through literacy coaches in the schools)

- ✓ **Purpose:** To increase use of appropriate instructional practices for teaching early reading

The full-day, large-group trainings focus on reading content, while the coaching sessions focus on application of the content. The two professional learning designs overlap and, together, drive the improvement of student reading proficiency.

■ The MDE plans and leads the implementation of teacher training that focuses on the five research-based reading components.

The MDE staff knew that Mississippi teachers needed PD focused on the five research-based components of reading identified by the National Reading Panel (2008) as core requisites of the reading process:

- **Phonemic awareness:** the knowledge and manipulation of sounds in spoken words
- **Phonics:** the relationship between written and spoken letters and sounds
- **Reading fluency:** the ability to read with accuracy, and with appropriate rate, expression, and phrasing
- **Vocabulary:** the knowledge of words, their definitions, and context
- **Reading comprehension:** the understanding of meaning in text

The MDE's training approach helps address teacher training needs in the area of best practices for teaching and learning English literacy. The MDE has procured Voyager Sopris Learning to provide the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training. The training is designed to enhance teaching of a school's reading curriculum or basal reading program. According to one staff member in the MDE, LETRS "explores the reasons why many students have reading difficulties and the ways children learn to read and examines the sequence of phonological skill development. LETRS also addresses differences between syllables and morphemes, between irregular and high-frequency words, and among six syllable types." This PD helps "connect training content to classroom instruction, relate scientific research and theory to classroom instruction, discuss research through interactive activities and exercises, and . . . practice the application of best practices [to] instruction."

Teachers who attend training during the school year receive a regular salary, and their teaching assignments are covered by a district-paid substitute teacher. In addition, the state offers this training to any other teachers who desire to attend, including prekindergarten teachers and teachers of students with disabilities. The trainings, to date, have included prekindergarten through high school teachers and principals. The MDE has trained more than 15,000⁴ teachers and administrators, a number that may include duplicate registrants, in LETRS and other literacy-related trainings.

■ **The MDE builds a network of literacy coaches.**

The MDE leadership staff has utilized proven, research-based strategies to create a process and criteria for selecting highly skilled, knowledgeable, and experienced teachers to become coaches—developing a network of literacy coaches to assist teachers in applying the information learned at the LETRS training. The process requires a face-to-face interview of prospective coaches. In addition, these applicants role-play a coaching conversation with a “mock teacher” after observing a video of a teacher working with students on reading. Through this exercise, the MDE is able to assess the applicants’ knowledge about reading as well as their coaching skills. This is one of the MDE’s key strategies, but the organization continues to refine its selection process to improve the quality of its coaches.

The MDE recognizes that building the coaching network requires focused recruitment and management of expectations. After difficulty finding coaches during the first year, the MDE added a midyear recruiting effort to the annual literacy coach recruitment drive. Often, prospective coaches were unsure about leaving their current teaching positions, the MDE solved this problem by utilizing “an educator-in-residence” model. Teachers apply to the state for a coaching position, and if they are accepted, the district replaces them but guarantees them a position in the district on their return. The salary of the educator-in-residence is paid by the state, and the teacher from the district is considered “on loan” to the network.

■ **The MDE focuses its search for literacy coaches.**

The MDE seeks literacy coaches with the education, experience, and disposition (i.e., the “personal touch” to be able to affect classroom teachers across the state and build credibility for the initiative) that align with the MDE’s organizational goals for literacy. Dedication, expertise, and energy are essential. According to a coach vacancy notice on the MDE website, coaches must have the following qualifications:

- A master’s degree in education with three years of documented success teaching reading or a bachelor’s degree with five years documented success teaching reading, with a minimum of three years of literacy experience at the state, district, or school level
- A valid Mississippi Educator Professional License
- Successful experience facilitating adult learning and delivering PD specific to literacy instruction

⁴ As the legislation required, schools identified for coaching support had the first opportunity to participate, and the LETRS sessions were typically offered on the target school campuses.

- Experience mentoring, coaching, and providing feedback about instruction to classroom teachers
- Experience leading collaboration
- Experience analyzing and using student achievement data for instructional purposes
- Ability to travel on a daily basis, among other skills and attributes

The MDE received 600 coaching applications for positions in its first cohort (2013–2014) and used rigorous criteria to select 24 literacy coaches (4%); by the end of the year, the MDE had hired five additional coaches. According to state staff, finding highly qualified coaches was a difficult task; the MDE did not meet the initial goal of hiring 75 coaches, although the department came close to it in the third year. With each passing year, the MDE has found more qualified applicants to become coaches. In 2015, the department hired 26 literacy coaches, 80% of whom attended one or more LETRS training and all of whom collaborated with other coaches in their own school buildings. Exhibit 4 shows the numbers of school and district literacy coaches for school years (SY) 2013–2014, 2014–2015, and 2015–2016.

Exhibit 4. School and Districts Receiving Literacy Coaches			
Distribution of coaches	SY 2013–2014	SY 2014–2015	SY 2015–2016
Literacy coaches	29	51	74
Schools with coaches	50	87	126
Districts with coaches	26	46	65

Each month, literacy coaches meet for additional training in pedagogy, literacy content, data analysis, and the most current research on scientifically based strategies. They also request what they need and share resources with one another. The MDE also provides information for coaches through webinars, so that teachers can continue to develop literacy and teaching competence. Overall, the coaches appear to be resources for one another. In addition, they have learned specifically about coaching through books such as *The Heart of Coaching: Using Transformational Coaching To Create a High-Performance Coaching Culture* (Crane & Patrick, 2012) and the *ABC's of Coaching Success* (Eikenberry & Harris, 2011). All of this PD is important, as the learning experiences of the literacy coaches have implications for their ability to fulfill organizational goals. It is also important to note that the MDE has provided aforementioned coaching training to 175 additional educators who serve in a coaching capacity within their schools or districts.

Coaches provide assistance to teachers in numerous areas, including in the five reading components. Exhibit 5 illustrates the areas of assistance most cited by the teachers.

Exhibit 5. Areas of Coaches' Assistance	
Topic	Areas of assistance
Five reading components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Continued clarification of the reading components ✓ Ideas for teaching the components, e.g., guided reading
Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Learning centers ✓ Differentiated instruction ✓ Strategies for highest and lowest performing students ✓ Classroom management ✓ Policy and procedures for literacy-based classroom writing
Data and assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Data rooms ✓ Progress monitoring ✓ Student needs and student groups based on data ✓ Lessons based on data ✓ Progress monitoring
Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Planning lessons aligned with standards
Working as a team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Professional learning community ✓ Coteaching, modeling lessons, and conferences

As the above exhibit shows, the MDE literacy coaches provide support to teachers around the five reading components, instructional issues, data and assessments, standards, and strategies for working as a team as well as modeling best practices and having coaching conversations that encourage self-reflection. Coaches who were interviewed by SECC staff expressed dedication to their work and enthusiasm about the changes they had seen among teachers, students, and principals. They also noted the importance of having strong and trusting relationships with the principals, as they perceived principal buy-in as crucial to the success of the literacy initiative.

One coach described her role as delineated by two key functions—serving as a conduit between the MDE and the school and finding resources for the teachers. All of the literacy coaches that SECC staff interviewed reported feeling that the MDE supported their work and that administrators were beginning to take notice of the results of their work with teachers.

“We are becoming users of data rather than viewers of data.”
– Literacy Coach

For example, one administrator said, “Many teachers previously lacked the ability to diagnose reading problems.” As a result of support (from literacy coaches), they now have the capacity to do so. Administrators suggested that this change was translating to greater teacher focus on data. Teachers are now able to review and study data to gain a better understanding of the needs and strengths of their students; such efforts also help them in planning and delivering personalized instruction to students to help them to move on to the next level. Administrators also noted that teachers’ increased attention to data and student growth had generated a greater sense of urgency to overcome literacy underperformance. For example, teachers in one county have decided to extend the reach of reading interventions by broadening the parameters for the identification of low-performing readers needing intervention. Instead of focusing intervention on only the students whose reading performance falls within the bottom 10%, these teachers have included readers whose

performance is in the bottom 25%. While this upward shift of 15% is still small, it is a change that several interviewees considered to be noteworthy.

Other ideas worth noting include comments from teachers, administrators, and coaches. For example, many interviewees identified LETRS training and literacy coaches as the most important areas of support. With regard to coaching, in particular, one interviewee noted that the MDE coaches were “the key supports.” As for LETRS, another teacher said, “Before the training, I was lost; I was old-fashioned in my teaching.” A different teacher, in discussing her increased use of learning centers and the shift away from a teacher-centered focus and toward a more student-centered approach, commented, “I have let loose; I don’t have to be so much in control of my classroom; I let [students] have more of a role in their learning; [I] let them learn from each other.”

These are only a few of numerous comments from the interviews SECC staff conducted in the schools. In addition to LETRS training and coaching, interviewees identified other useful strategies that the state initiated and/or led. For example, several principals noted the value of the “learning walks,” in which they accompanied the coach twice a year to observe classrooms for the implementation of best practices in teaching reading while focusing on specific areas of instruction, routines/environments, and preparation/planning.

All of the MDE initiatives require funding at all levels. To address this matter at the school level, the MDE established a grant that made every elementary school in the state, regardless of academic standing, eligible to apply for money—from \$25,000 to \$50,000. Proposed uses for the funding include personnel support, such as that of tutors, instructional coaches, reading specialists, and dyslexia experts. The MDE awarded 33 literacy-support grants totaling \$1,471,296 for 2014–2015 and 33 grants totaling \$1,298,087 for 2015–2016.

■ **The MDE expands literacy trainings to support K–12 teachers and administrators.**

The MDE has developed training modules to support literacy instruction in elementary and secondary schools. *Passport to Literacy* and *Passport BOOST* are trainings designed as a follow-up and support of practical strategies for literacy instruction for Pre-K through second grade teachers. In addition, *Rethink Literacy!*, is a training for 3rd–12th grade teachers. This training is designed to build teacher capacity for addressing literacy instruction in the content areas—English, social studies, science, mathematics, and Algebra I. This module also included a separate component that addresses the specific roles of curriculum coordinators, administrators, and coaches in supporting literacy instruction at the elementary and secondary level. The individual components of these trainings are also available upon request through the MDE’s Office of Professional Development.

In addition to the resources received at trainings, the MDE also provides guidance for elementary and secondary literacy instruction through its *Literacy Focus of the Month* manuals. The manuals include strategies and provide guidance to administrators and teachers for supporting a monthly, school-wide instructional focus based on best practices and research-based strategies in literacy. The “user-friendly” guides assist districts and schools in the implementation of reading instruction in classrooms across multiple grade levels as well as different subjects/content areas.

Overall, the MDE implemented several mechanisms for supporting districts and schools in advancing student achievement in reading. The department developed tools and templates for schools and districts to share with parents and communities, and leadership staff traveled throughout the state to conduct an LBPA awareness campaign. In addition, and as designated in the act (and approved by the governor, state superintendent, and the Mississippi House and Senate Education chairpersons), the MDE established the State Reading Panel—an advisory group to help guide the literacy initiative. The next section showcases efforts at the district level.

District-Level Actions and Initiatives

The MDE carries the responsibility of implementing, with fidelity, the mechanisms and initiatives it developed in response to the LBPA. Although the state has initiated a majority of the initiatives and implemented policies for addressing the act, it was important for these initiatives to be operationalized through the district and schools. For example, superintendents (district-level leaders) play an instrumental role at the district level; they are the intermediaries between the state office and the school, even though the MDE leadership staff plays a strong role in interacting directly with schools in accordance with the MDE’s collaborative model.

■ Key school district tasks

Essentially, the state bears critical responsibility in shaping practice at the district and school levels, although specific portions of the act, namely sections § 37-177-3 and § 37-177-13, identify important tasks that districts need to engage in to help satisfy legislative mandates. Many of the district requirements, however, also have implications for school-based actions related to the person or persons who would be involved in supporting the districts’ completion of certain tasks specified in the act. Exhibit 6 shows school district tasks or actions that are directly aligned to the specifications of the act and the persons at the school and district levels who are responsible for those actions.

Exhibit 6. School District Tasks and Completers in Relation to Provisions in the LBPA		
School district tasks/requirements		Task completers
§ 37-177-3 Written notification to parent/guardians of determination of reading deficiency	(a) Prepare a description of services that the school district is currently providing to the student.	✓ Student’s school—coach ✓ Teachers
	(b) Prepare a description of the proposed supplemental instructional services and supports. . . which the school district plans to provide to the student.	✓ Student’s school—coach ✓ Teachers
§ 37-177-13 For students not promoted at end of third grade	(a) Provide students with a minimum of 90 minutes during regular school hours of daily, scientifically research-based reading instruction that includes the five components of reading.	✓ Student’s school—coach ✓ Teachers
	(b) Provide written notification to parents.	✓ Student’s school—principal
	(c) Place student with high-performing teacher.	✓ Student’s school—principal ✓ Teacher
	(d) Provide parents with read-at-home plan.	✓ Student’s school—principal ✓ Teacher

As Exhibit 6 shows, the district plays a meaningful role, although the task completers are primarily school-level staff, including teachers in schools in the district. Essentially, the work involves a high level of collaboration between state staff and the school staff; the work is driven by the district and is often operationalized by teachers in various schools in the district. Other areas of collaboration that reflect district-level initiatives include professional learning communities (PLCs) and the classroom communities created by the promotion of small class sizes. These are discussed in the next two sections.

■ Professional learning communities

One district reported that all K–3 teachers participated in biweekly PLCs, with the focus of each session determined by the student and teacher needs identified by coaches and administrators during classroom observations. PLCs differ in needs, content, or focus but center around data analysis, planning and preparation based on data findings, or building of content knowledge. Interviewed coaches noted that they tried to build teachers’ capacity over time to lead the PLCs to increase their leadership abilities.

“Teaching can be a lonely job; teachers aren’t isolated any longer.”

– Literacy Coach

■ Smaller class sizes

Another district arranged to have class sizes of 14 to 15 students. One interviewee noted, “They wanted to give us every advantage,” and part of the advantage for students is a reduced class size, which is shown in research to facilitate greater student collaboration and greater opportunities for classroom management. In essence, the recommendation of smaller class sizes directly relates to the need to support student learning, especially that of third-grade students who need to achieve reading proficiency to transition to the fourth grade.

It is important to note here that the MDE decided to limit the district-level burden of the LBPA initiative. The MDE provides support directly to the schools and teachers. When MDE identifies a district as having students with scores that make that district eligible to receive a literacy coach, MDE staff visit the district and communicate the need for district buy-in for the coaches and LETRS training, emphasizing that buy-in is the single most important role for the districts. The next section describes actions that are specific to, and implemented by, the MDE-identified schools.

School-Level Actions and Initiatives

Once the MDE staff visit the school district, a meeting with the affected school or schools occurs. The meeting includes the MDE staff and the school’s leaders. The literacy coach attends the meeting, as well, with a goal of gaining buy-in from the principal(s), similar to the way in which the MDE approaches the goal of buy-in at the district level. For this purpose, the MDE has developed several presentations (e.g., handouts, PowerPoint presentations, and webinars), which are available on the department’s website (<http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/ESE/literacy>). While the MDE is responsible for all actions that respond to the LBPA, the recipients of the actions are typically at the school level (as is shown in Exhibit 6). School staff play a large role in improving

the reading level of students, with much of the work defined through teacher and principal training and PD.

■ LETRS training for teachers and principals

PD is one of the fundamental drivers of organizational change, and at the school level, teachers and principals are the main targets for change. Teachers and principals attend a six-day, MDE-funded LETRS training, in which they collaborate with coaches. As the school leader, the principal plays a critical role in the logistical aspects of the training and of implementing the LBPA. For example, the principal completes tasks such as finding a location for development and maintenance of data walls, rescheduling the day for the 90- to 120-minute literacy block, and extending the school day by leveraging federal funds, as necessary.

Teachers play an important role in organizing their classrooms for optimal student growth—for example, by creating learning centers and anchor charts within the context of the classroom. Teachers meet in PLCs, arranged by principals, to create and review data and plan lessons. In the LETRS training, there is great emphasis on evidence- and data-based decision making. These are hallmarks of progress-monitoring practices in the schools, which the MDE's PD offerings strengthen. Training topics, such as differentiation of instruction, are a natural outgrowth of both the biweekly monitoring and the monthly postings in the data rooms. Such practices, which LETRS training promotes, have implications for teachers' ability to challenge students academically while helping advance their growth and capacity in reading.

Responses from interviews with teachers and principals regarding their work with the literacy coaches showed that both teachers and principals appreciated the school/coach partnership and the resulting improvement they noticed in their teaching in general and in the students' learning in particular. Exhibit 7 illustrates a sample case of actions at the school level.

Exhibit 7. The Literacy Act in Action: A Sample Case

On the approach to the river town and immediately off the interstate, the school appears in the valley. The first impression is of a modern school without surrounding homes, meaning that the students are bused to the school. The school's entrance looks relatively new—as though it was built within the past 10 years. The large stone atrium empties into several hallways, one of which leads to the elementary classrooms.

Behind the office area is a small data room, covered in large, colorful charts. Each classroom has its own chart with horizontal rows of pockets, representing score ranges on the assessments. Each student has a card that is placed in the corresponding row, demonstrating the current score. Teachers move the cards up and down to show student growth, group students for reading, and determine specific instruction they need. This data room provides an established setting for the implementations the MDE supports and for the “non-negotiables,” such as working with the literacy coach, PLCs, progress monitoring, and grade-level lesson planning.

A walk to the classrooms shows hallways and bulletin boards with student work (not frivolous decorations but real examples of students' writing and reading). The classrooms are colorful, filled with posters called “anchor charts,” which outline the focus of study for the week or longer. Unique seating arrangements allow for learning centers—a strategy that allows the class to be divided into smaller groups with the teacher and assistant working intensely with two different groups. At tables or computer labs, students sound out words to spell, individually read books selected for their level on the computer and answer questions, use a dictionary to define words, and more. Students move quietly from center to center according to announcements and show general excitement when told by the teacher, “It's time for our learning centers.”

In other classrooms, teachers, some with more mastery than others, perform similar practices. Unanimously, the teachers agree that their professional learning has been advanced by the MDE's literacy coaches and LETRS training. “I see myself progressing,” notes one teacher. In a similar vein, the students have more confidence—there is no more “I can't.” Parents are partners in reading with “live” school programs in which the students perform—increasing the motivation for parental attendance. One school staff noted that “Over the three years, [they] have seen an increase in concern about children from parents; some ask weekly what teachers are doing and what they, as parents, should do at home.”

There is one unexpected observation. One of the coaches explained that one third-grade teacher was on short-term disability, and as a result, the school hired a substitute teacher. As a provisional plan, certified teachers volunteered to teach the reading lesson so that students would receive reading instruction from a certified teacher. Teachers accepted the challenge of taking on the additional students, and demonstrated their commitment to the students' receiving instruction from a certified teacher rather than from an uncertified substitute teacher. One teacher stated, “Third grade is just too important [for students] to have a substitute teacher.” The aim here is not only that students have teachers but that they have qualified teachers who are certified to teach in a subject area that is critical for their advancement: reading.

Student Demographics

All students	691
Black	89.4%
White	9.8%
Hispanic	0.0%
Special education	19.7%
English language learner	0.8%

Classrooms

Pre-K	3
Kindergarten	7
First grade	7
Second grade	7
Third grade	7

STAR Scores* for Third Grade

Assessments	Passed
1 st test	73%
2 nd test	85%

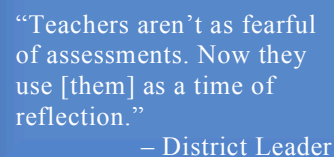
*STAR projects that students who score at or above the 40th percentile rank (PR) will be reading on or above grade level at the end of 3rd grade.

The school level is where the MDE is implementing important changes. This level presents the background for shaping teaching and learning and, therefore, is central to actions for addressing the legislation. The school is the locale of teachers and students, and the place where research-based practices become operational—both through the LETRS training and in the classroom. The next section provides a discussion of these research-based practices.

Implementation of Research-Based Interventions and Practices

All the initiatives that the MDE implements at the state, district, and school levels reflect best practices in PD and literacy. For the principles of literacy, the MDE staff uses standards for professional learning (Learning Forward, 2011), research-based strategies for assisting students struggling with reading, response to intervention (RTI) and multitier intervention for reading in the primary grades (Gersten et al., 2008), and research from the National Reading Panel report (National Center for Family Literacy, 2008). The literacy team also uses data walls and the work of Reeves (2006) as tools to assist schools in making data-driven decisions. The work of Moats (2004; 2006) and Archer (2011) drives the explicit instruction component that the literacy staff employs to help teachers understand the importance of systematic and explicit instruction in reading and spelling. The key leaders regularly conduct research to identify strategies and resources that support teachers' and coaches' identified needs.

Many schools use Accelerated Reader, a computerized assessment of students' comprehension of the books they read beyond those assigned in class. The Accelerated Reader program involves a points-based program in which students earn points based on their performance on the comprehension test.



“Teachers aren’t as fearful of assessments. Now they use [them] as a time of reflection.”
– District Leader

One teacher noted, “My students have more of a love of reading...I don’t force it. Lots of parents want to work with them on this at home.” A second-grade teacher reported that the literacy coach taught teachers how to identify individual student data from the STAR reading assessment—a computerized test that grades reading ability on the basis of passages students have read. This enables teachers to target individual and group instruction by ability.

Literacy support schools receive monthly reports from the MDE. These reports, provided to district staff, principals, and the MDE, highlight key aspects of the work of literacy coaches—modeling and co-teaching support. In essence, teachers advance their skills through research-based PD and utilize new strategies in the classroom to support student learning and development in reading. The teachers SECC staff interviewed indicated that they were noticing some important differences in their students. Teachers at the third-grade level shared similar sentiments. One teacher commented, “They [the students] have an opportunity to read.” Another teacher stated, “The students are becoming better readers.” These are examples of some promising changes that teachers observed; the next section discusses more of these examples.

PROMISING PRACTICES AND NOTICEABLE CHANGES AT ALL LEVELS

Many of the interviewees identified promising practices and/or noticeable changes that they believe resulted from the MDE implementation of its strategies and actions. One staff member noted that the community has begun to take notice of the changes in the schools, “People have pulled out all the stops around this to coalesce around this piece. It’s not just the governor talking about it. It’s not just the superintendent of education. It is people in communities. It’s barbershops. . . .” Engagement of schools and the broader community is essential for progress. The “promising practices,” as described by interviewees, are the non-negotiables, some of which appear in the following bulleted list:

- **Involvement in the community:** Under one program⁵ started in 2015 and coordinated by the Jackson Council Parent Teacher Association, books were available at barbershops and barbers received training to engage young readers. News reports⁶ noted a new program in which many optometrists offered to provide free eye exams to students who had failed the reading assessment and to provide help for these students to get glasses, if necessary.
- **Establishment of a grant:** The MDE established a grant to support school-level efforts, including tutors, instructional coaches, reading specialists, and experts in dyslexia.
- **Building a coaching network:** This includes focused recruitment and talent management.
- **Promoting transparency and trust:** The value of transparency and the need to build trust is evident, as those working on the initiative have strived to say what they know, acknowledge what they do not know, and take and respond to feedback.
- **Smaller class sizes:** One district arranged to have class sizes of 14 to 15 students.
- **Classroom management:** Two schools noticed the need for a strong student management program. One school uses multi-tier systems of support (MTSS), and another uses RTI, with a teacher noting, “If you don’t have classroom discipline, nothing can be learned.”
- **Literacy coach selection strategy:** The MDE seeks dedication, expertise, and energy, as well as a strong educational background and experience in its literacy coaches.
- **Professional learning communities:** All K–3 teachers participate in PLCs, with the focus of the sessions determined by what coaches and administrators have identified during previous classroom observations.
- **LETRS training is enlightening:** A second-grade teacher called the LETRS training “enlightening, a lot of good ideas you think were automatically taught in higher education. It showed the reasons for doing what we were doing.”
- **Assessments showing some promise:** The annual statewide assessment that all third graders take to determine their reading proficiency and eligibility to move on to fourth grade provides a significant signal about the impact of the literacy initiative. Since the annual assessment changed for the 2014–2015 school year, comparison with prior years is difficult. However, performance on the new tests establishes a new benchmark.

⁵ See <http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/TD/news/2015/08/24/books-in-the-barbershop-promotes-literacy-in-jackson>

⁶ See <http://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2015/06/02/free-eye-exams-for-mississippi-third-graders/28343159/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin>

The MDE’s Third-Grade Reading Summative Assessment Results Overview shows that 92% of students achieved the Minimum Passing Score of 926. The State Scale Score average is 980. In the initial April 2015 testing on the computerized 50-question, 60-minute assessment, 32,219 students (85.17%) scored at or above the minimum to pass the assessment, while 5,612 students (14.83%) scored below the minimum. After the first retest in May 2015 and the second retest during Summer 2015, the number of students who passed reached 35,022 students (92.34%), while 2,907 students (7.66%) remained below the minimum score.

A student who passes the assessment has acquired the minimum reading skills necessary for learning fourth-grade standards, while students who score within a close range of the cut score or below still need additional intervention and supports in areas such as the following:

- Answer questions, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answer.
- Determine the central message, lesson, or moral in literary text.
- Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.
- Determine and clarify the meaning of unknown or multiple-meaning words and phrases.

Overall, according to the MDE staff, signs of promising practices include steadily improving scores for the state on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics’ uniform sampling of student performance across the country. Staff also noted that the Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast will evaluate the state’s PD efforts, research that will include filming and observing classrooms—another potentially promising practice that will provide important data for reflection and continued refinement in practice.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: STRENGTHS AND NEEDS

The MDE has achieved many accomplishments and made noticeable improvements in supporting teaching and learning around literacy. But the MDE’s vision extends beyond the work it has completed so far. An MDE staff member noted, “Until every school has a highly effective coach, we have work to do.”

In the midst of accomplishments, there are some challenges. Namely, it is not just third grade that is of concern. School staff mentioned that many second graders need remedial help with reading, and there are sixth graders in the same predicament, while funding is lacking for extra assistance. In addition, retaining qualified teachers poses a challenge; it will be necessary to address significant turnover among K–3 teachers coming from nontraditional preparation programs. Beginning July 1, 2016, the requirements for elementary education majors to receive educators licenses have been raised to include the passing of the Foundations of Reading Exam, as required by Senate Bill 2572 (2014).

What’s next for the MDE?

“Until every school has a highly effective coach, we have work to do!”

– MDE Leader

In an effort to address these challenges, in March 2015, the MDE appointed a K–12 state director to expand supports statewide. The MDE also sought to provide more guidance and support for the implementation of a multitiered system of support by appointing a director of Intervention Services. The State Literacy Plan and the State Board of Education 5-Year State Strategic Plan are guiding the new efforts, dubbed “Rethink Literacy!” In addition, the state has recently completed its revision of English language arts standards for Grades K–12. A diverse group of Mississippi educators reviewed and responded to public comments regarding Mississippi’s academic standards and made revisions to the standards to better prepare students for success in college or the workplace.

CONCLUSION

Within two years after Mississippi passed its Literacy-Based Promotion Act, the MDE responded to the specifications of the act with focused, purposeful actions and mechanisms that included research-based interventions to advance the teaching and learning of literacy. According to the MDE leadership staff and teachers, the aim of the act is to build school-level capacity, including teacher capacity, so that students could receive the high-quality, research-based interventions in reading that would ensure their progression beyond the third grade. In essence, the MDE created a system of supports that addressed the needs of learners by addressing the needs of their teachers and those positioned to lead educational change. The MDE established an Early Childhood Office, a Reading Office, and an Intervention Services Office, all of which provided direct supports and PD to teachers, and led the Strong Readers = Strong Leaders campaign and strategic-planning efforts.

According to one interviewee, “Our system of supports is not designed to just focus narrowly on a small group of schools. All of our third graders . . . [and] K–12 (teachers) need the support. Support is differentiated—you get more support if you have more students who are below proficiency.” In other words, “everybody gets access to high-quality training.” This high-quality training is delivered through careful stewardship of legislatively appropriated funding for that purpose. One interviewee noted that, “we have been good stewards of the resources appropriated. . . . We went from having a commander and some first lieutenants to having an army of people focused on how to get the work done.”

Promising practices and signs of momentum are emerging as the state takes on the literacy challenge, and it will be up to Mississippi’s policymakers and educators (district superintendents, principals, teachers, and instructional coaches), students, parents, and the broader community to coalesce and keep the literacy initiative moving toward higher achievement. Some changes in Mississippi’s literacy landscape are becoming obvious, and so is the return on the investment. As one leader noted, “You can see it in our student scores; our NAEP results are continuing to improve; we have stronger students. We’ve got to make sure it doesn't stop in third grade.”

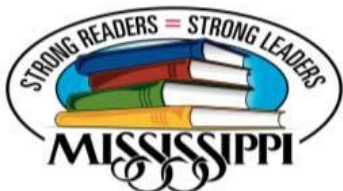
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APPENDICES

Appendix A. MDE Summary of the Literacy-Based Promotion Act

Literacy-Based Promotion Act



The purpose of the Literacy-Based Promotion Act is to improve the reading skills of kindergarten and first- through third-grade public school students so that every student completing third grade reads at or above grade level. The intent is to increase the proficiency of all students in reading by the end of their third-grade year of school.

Third-Grade Reading Summative Assessment—From the 2014–2015 school year on, a student scoring at the lowest achievement level in reading on the established state assessment for third grade will not be promoted to fourth grade.

Social Promotion—A student may *not* be assigned a grade level based solely on age or any other factor that constitutes social promotion.

Public School Requirements—If a K–3 student has been identified with a substantial deficit in reading, the teacher will **immediately**, and with each quarterly progress report, **notify parents or legal guardians of the following in writing**:

- Determination of a substantial deficit in reading;
- Description of student services and supports presently provided;
- Description of proposed supplemental instruction and support to remediate the student’s deficit areas;
- Strategies for parents to use to help students at home; and
- Notification that student will not be promoted to fourth grade if reading deficiency cannot be remediated by the end of third grade.
- Provision of intensive reading instruction and **immediate intervention** to each K–3 student who exhibits a substantial deficiency in reading at any time.

Good Cause Exemptions

A third-grade student who fails to meet the academic requirements for promotion to the fourth grade may be promoted for **good cause**:

- Limited English proficient students with less than two (2) years of instruction in English language learner program;
- Students with disabilities whose individualized education program (IEP) indicates that participation in the statewide accountability assessment program is not appropriate, as authorized under state law;
- Students with a disability who participate in the accountability assessment and who have an IEP or Section 504 plan that reflects that the student has received intense remediation in reading for two (2) years but still demonstrates a deficiency and was previously retained;
- Students who demonstrate an acceptable level of reading proficiency on an alternative assessment approved by the state board of education; and
- Students who have received intensive intervention in reading for two (2) or more years but still demonstrate a deficiency in reading and who previously were retained in kindergarten or first, second or third grade for a total of two (2) years and have not met exceptional education criteria.

Literacy-Based Promotion Act

- A student who is promoted to fourth grade with a good cause exemption shall be provided intensive reading instruction and intervention informed by specialized diagnostic information and delivered through specific reading strategies to meet the needs of each student so promoted. The school district shall assist schools and teachers in implementing reading strategies that research has shown to be successful in improving reading among students with persistent reading difficulties.

Appendix B. Interviewees and Roles

Exhibit B-1. Interviewees and Roles						
Teachers		School staff		District staff		State staff
Kindergarten	1	Principals	8	Superintendent/assistant	2	(includes literacy coaches)
First	3	Assistant principals	2	Curriculum/instruction coordinator	8	
Second	4	Lead teachers	4	Improvement officer	1	
Third	8			Interventionist	1	
Fourth	1					
K-Third	9					
<i>Subtotal</i>	26		<i>14</i>		<i>12</i>	<i>19</i>
						Total = 71

Strong Readers = Strong Leaders Report (February 2016)
Mississippi Department of Education
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