

NEWS RELEASE

## New Analysis of State Reading Legislation Reveals Most Ambitious Reform Effort in Nation’s History

*Report Shows Strong National Consensus on Reading Instruction as well as Bipartisan Drive for Change*

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**Washington**—A new report released today by the Albert Shanker Institute systematically examines more than 200 reading laws enacted in 45 states and the District of Columbia between 2019 and 2022. This granular analysis showcases an ambitious, bipartisan, state-driven effort to improve U.S. reading outcomes through multilayered investments in teachers and students. While the report identifies missing priority areas, like comprehensive supports for teachers and students, it also reveals a growing policy consensus about how to tackle reading reform in state legislatures, perhaps signaling an ebb in the perception of raging “reading wars.”

The report, [\*Reading Reform Across America: A Survey of State Legislation\*](#), offers a comprehensive examination of reading legislation on more than 40 areas, including teacher preparation, professional development, assessment, family engagement and student supports. Many findings run counter to conventional wisdom about the wave of legislation—for example, debunking misperceptions that recent legislation focuses only on phonics.

Susan B. Neuman (New York University), the report’s lead author and former U.S. assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education, noted: “This is a historic moment. This legislation is the biggest, boldest and most inclusive effort to date to promote high-quality, scientifically supported reading instruction for all children. We cannot fail.

“The extraordinary learning gains in Mississippi are not the result of a ‘miracle’ but rather the outcome of sustained and collaborative work over time among administrators, teachers and coaches. Their ongoing commitment to a targeted focus on children's reading achievement makes it clear that the work of improving literacy is a continuous process, never truly finished.”

The findings are promising and indicate that, while progress has been made, more work remains.

## KEY FINDINGS:

- **Bills are not dominated by phonics.** In most states (34), laws reference the Five Pillars of the National Reading Panel. However, there are **notable gaps relative to literacy essentials**. Oral language and writing are less emphasized. Background knowledge is only mentioned in laws from six states.
- **Broader scope than previous legislation.** Forty-two states enacted at least one bill targeting students from kindergarten to third grade and beyond. Additionally, laws in 31 states include pre-K. Laws from most states (37 of 46) explicitly include charter schools. Only 12 states passed laws targeting Title I schools exclusively.
- **Legislation is bipartisan and state-driven.** Comprehensive reading laws have been enacted in both traditionally conservative and traditionally progressive states. This report features exemplar legislation from states across the political spectrum.
- **Unequal attention to student groups.** Dyslexia takes a prominent spotlight, with laws in 33 states thoroughly addressing students with dyslexia. However, English learners' needs are less emphasized; laws in only 10 states include an in-depth discussion.
- **Prioritizing assessment.** Every state's legislation, barring South Dakota, references student assessment, with 35 states discussing it in detail. Meanwhile, comprehensive supports for students, such as reading plans, summer school and tutoring, receive limited attention.
- **Teachers take center stage,** as pre-service preparation and ongoing professional development are at the heart of this legislation. However, most states fall short of systemic supports for educators: Only about one-third of states delve deeply into curriculum or school leadership in their laws, with a mere 11 extensively addressing both areas.
- **Family involvement is significantly addressed** in the laws of 38 states, with 21 offering it thorough consideration. Similarly, while 26 states mention community engagement, only 14 explore it more thoroughly.
- **Fragmentation and missing links.** The analysis finds that bills pay limited attention to alignment and coherence across different aspects of reading education, suggesting an insufficient focus on how various components of the system interact.

As evidenced by these key findings, states are making notable progress in crucial areas. However, what raises concern is the unequal focus on different student groups by states, paired with an emphasis on screening and assessment that isn't balanced with a corresponding commitment to comprehensive supports for students. A focus on measurement without the ensuing supports is an inadequate practice. Similarly, teachers' knowledge about scientifically based reading instruction isn't enough; additional supports like effective school leadership and high-quality curriculum are indispensable for educators to apply their knowledge and achieve results with students. The report includes recommendations to encourage states to continue their journey to reading improvement. In addition, nine states are featured for their leadership in specific priority areas:

- **Alaska** is giving families a voice in their children's literacy education.
- **Arizona's** legislation exemplifies a holistic approach to defining reading.
- **California** is considering the needs of English learners and emergent bilinguals.

- **Colorado** demonstrates a commitment to community engagement around reading.
- **Delaware** provides an example curriculum aligned with professional development.
- **Kentucky's** legislation recognizes writing instruction as a key component of literacy.
- **Michigan** offers a comprehensive set of supports for students.
- **Texas** has legislation that outlines professional development across grade levels.
- **Utah's** legislation focuses on developing capacity-building leadership.

Randi Weingarten, president of the Albert Shanker Institute board of directors and the American Federation of Teachers, points out, “This report reveals that states, regardless their political persuasion, are answering teachers’ call for better support with regard to reading instruction. I applaud state leaders for answering that call and investing in our teachers. At the same time, this report highlights problems in the emphasis on accountability instead of on the systemic supports needed for reading success. We hope states will follow the report’s recommendations as well as those of the leaders cited for their exemplary work.

“To help our students become joyful and confident readers, we must understand that teaching reading is not just an art, but also a science. For decades, the Shanker Institute and the AFT have pushed for science-based instruction, beginning with our 1998 resolution on ‘Beginning Reading Instruction’ and the Shanker Institute’s work on early literacy.”

Mary Cathryn Ricker, executive director of the Albert Shanker Institute, board-certified teacher, and former state education commissioner, states, “Given the persistent and predictable disparities in reading proficiency across racial and ethnic lines, it is encouraging to see states take an all-in approach to supporting teachers and their students to strengthen reading instruction. I know state leaders take local control seriously, so when state legislators come together to address evidence-based reading it sends a message that this is a priority. While legislation is not the only way to strengthen reading instruction, we are encouraged by the state legislative endeavors we’ve seen since 2019, and we recommend states continue to expand their efforts.”

The report’s companion website features an outline of our policy recommendations, a succinct fact sheet, and tools to delve into the legislative data, which ASI is making publicly available.

Noting that the pace of legislation shows no sign of slowing, with more than 50 reading bills enacted since January 2023, ASI plans annual updates to this report, as well as supplemental short briefs on key topics in the coming year.

**Read the full report at: [shankerinstitute.org/read](https://shankerinstitute.org/read).**

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***About the Albert Shanker Institute:***

*The Albert Shanker Institute, endowed by the American Federation of Teachers and named in honor of its late president, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to three themes—children’s education, unions as an advocate for quality, and both civic education and freedom of association in the public life of democracies. Its mission is to generate ideas, foster candid exchanges and promote constructive policy proposals related to these issues. The institute commissions original analyses, organizes seminars, sponsors publications and subsidizes selected projects. Its independent board of directors is composed of educators, business representatives, labor leaders, academics and public policy analysts.*