

THE LEARNS ACT & LITERACY

Phonics is the instructional practice that once made America the most literate nation on earth. It relies on an intensive, systematic approach ... children learn to read by first learning the sounds and syllables of the English language. Then they can put syllables together like building blocks to quickly acquire a reading vocabulary as broad as their oral vocabulary ... In a typical phonics-first system, the child can read 24,000 words by the end of 4th grade ... The Whole Language method is used in 85% of our nation's schools ... Phonics is used in 15% of schools. Arkansas Policy Foundation, 1998 report

The Role of Dictionaries in Advancing Literacy, Policy Foundation forum, 2022

(2Q-2023) The recently-enacted LEARNS Act (PA237 of 2023) makes major revisions to Arkansas' K-12 education system. LEARNS stands for literacy, empowerment, accountability, readiness, networking and safety. In the literacy component, the 145-page LEARNS Act emphasizes phonics, and concepts such as "literacy goals," "literacy coaches," "literacy screeners," and "literacy grants."

Use of Phonics

The LEARNS Act creates an individual reading plan for each K-3 student who does not meet the standard established by the state Board of Education and measured by the state's annual accountability assessment. The individual reading plan shall include the "student's specific, diagnosed reading skill needs," including:

- Phonemic awareness and phonics decoding.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds in spoken words. Decoding is the process of learning how to say an unfamiliar word. LEARNS (Section 29) creates a remediation for "each student who does not meet the reading standard ... by the end of third grade ... (including) at least 90 minutes of ... literacy instruction ... each school day ... (with) a teacher ... in the top quartile statewide in English language arts for the past three years."

Literacy Goals

The LEARNS Act (Section 11) directs the state Department of Education's Division of Elementary and Secondary Education to implement a student assessment system in literacy and mathematics. The law also directs the division to "collect and publish aggregated public school district, open-enrollment public charter school, and overall state literacy assessment results annually by October 1."

Literacy Coaches

The act also requires that every K-3 teacher in a public school earning a “D” or “F” rating "access to a literacy coach to support increased literacy rates through coaching for teachers and administrators." A coach shall engage in the following activities:

- Leverage knowledge of evidence-based instruction and practices to support teachers in maximizing student learning;
- Engage in instructional coaching cycles with teachers;
- Deliver consistent and frequent job-embedded professional learning;
- Design and facilitate professional learning sessions with teachers to strengthen evidence-based instructional practices aligned to reading;
- Assist teachers in analyzing data to inform instructional adjustments;
- Partner with teachers to integrate professional learning into practice;
- Ensure effective communication strategies and resource sharing with teachers, parents and legal guardians;
- Partner with a principal or designated leader to connect school-wide literacy goals with evidence-based instruction and practices;
- Provide feedback on teachers’ evidence-based instruction and practices that may be used for teacher evaluations;
- Participate in professional learning to deepen knowledge and skills for coaching;
- Earn compensation on salary schedule to be determined by the division; and
- Earn a yearly bonus up to \$10,000 based on performance outcomes.

Literacy Screeners

LEARNS states literacy screeners "shall be utilized to determine student progression in reading in kindergarten through grade three (K-3)." Literacy assessments shall be: (a) given during the first thirty (30) days of the school year; (b) repeated, if indicated, midyear; and (c) given at the end of the school year." The education department "shall collect and publish aggregated public school district, open-enrollment public charter school, and overall state literacy assessment results annually by October 1," the act states.

Literacy Grants

Annual \$500 literacy tutoring grants shall be available for instruction of eligible student "on a first-come, first-served basis, with priority given to eligible students who are to be retained in third grade." A provider "that fails to demonstrate improvement in eligible students' reading abilities for two consecutive years shall be deemed ineligible to participate in the literacy tutoring grant program."

The education department secretary shall hire an education ombudsman to assist in LEARNS' enforcement including literacy programs. The secretary shall supervise the ombudsman and not delegate supervision. An individual who has served as a

past public school district superintendent or who serves as a current public school district superintendent is not eligible to serve as the education ombudsman.

Conclusion

The LEARNS Act seeks to improve Arkansas K-12 student literacy by emphasizing phonics and utilizing goals, coaches, screeners, and grants.

-- Greg Kaza