District-Wide Instructional Leadership for Literacy

Analyzing Tasks That District Leaders Undertake to Guide Primary-Level Reading Programming
at the Site and District Level

by
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ABSTRACT

Significant time and research have been invested into how elementary school staff can change the trajectory for early readers, with limited success in changing reading outcomes in grades 5K–2. While research exists, important issues need further study in order to provide guidance for district-level leaders of teaching and learning to ensure that their leadership actions establish the essential conditions for reading outcomes to improve in grades 5K–2.

My study was designed to address this perceived gap in the literature, uncovering the essential conditions in elementary schools where reading outcomes are improving and the leadership tasks district-level leaders have undertaken to lead for improved reading outcomes at the 5K–2 grade levels. A comparative qualitative analysis was chosen to provide rich, thick descriptions of the essential conditions and leadership actions undertaken by district-level leaders, and to examine how practitioners make meaning of the tasks they undertake to improve reading outcomes for all learners.

This qualitative comparative analysis was conducted by studying three public school districts in the state of Wisconsin with student enrollment between 3,000 and 10,000, and a district-level leader of teaching and learning in each district whose responsibility is to grow early reading outcomes. Bolman and Deal's Four Frames (2017) conceptual framework was applied to analyze the data that emerged about the directors of teaching and learning. Data gathered from the three school districts was obtained through artifact review, interviews, and observations.

Through my analysis, ten leadership tasks undertaken by district-level leaders for teaching and learning who are leading districts with improving outcomes in grades 5K–2 emerged. These ten leadership tasks are captured within this study. The findings of this study will provide guidance for district-level leaders of teaching and learning as they strive to improve reading outcomes for students in grades 5K–2.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Research

There is a prevailing need for public schools to improve in teaching young people how to read, because literacy plays a pivotal role in life. Those who are illiterate are at a serious disadvantage in that they are often unable to keep up with current events, communicate effectively, and understand the issues that are shaping our world. From a practical standpoint, the ability to read creates opportunities for people to develop skills that will help them provide for themselves and their family (Krashen, 2004). Learning to read is a nuanced, complex task that occurs in the space between a teacher and a learner. In order for all young people to learn to read well in school, site-level educators need the appropriate support when engaging with their students (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Dixon & Palmer, 2020). Site-level and district-level leaders need a knowledge base about reading and the leadership skills necessary to create the appropriate conditions for reading to occur (Calkins et.al., 2019). While significant time, money, and resources have been invested in studying classroom and school-level practices related to how children become readers, there is still a lot to learn about the leadership tasks district leaders must undertake to support the site-level staff in ensuring that all children learn to read well.

As an equity-focused district-level leader living in the state of Wisconsin, I struggle with persistent and disparate reading outcomes illustrating that less than half of students locally and nationwide are not proficient readers by the end of fourth grade (NAEP, 2022). Figure 1 illustrates reading achievement data for the state of Wisconsin as compared to the nation over a two-decade period.

Figure 1

NAEP Achievement-Level Percentages and Average Score Results

Wisconsin					Average Score
1998	31	36*	27	6*	222
2017	34	31	27	8	220
2019	34	30	26	9	220
Nation					
2019	35	31	26	9	219

Percent below *NAEP Basic* or at *NAEP Basic* level   Percent at *NAEP Proficient* or *NAEP Advanced* level

☐ Below *NAEP Basic*   ☐ *NAEP Basic*   ■ *NAEP Proficient*   ■ *NAEP Advanced*

* Significantly different (*p* < .05) from state's results in 2019. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers.
NOTE: NAEP achievement levels are to be used on a trial basis and should be interpreted and used with caution. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

Note. 2019 State Reading Results, Fourth Grade, Student Groups. From The Nation's Report Card, by National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022 (https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ltt/?age=9)

When reading data is disaggregated and analyzed by race/ethnicity, the results are far worse for fourth-grade students in Wisconsin who identify as Black, Hispanic, and American Indian / Alaskan Native (figure 2).

Figure 2

NAEP Results for Student Groups in 2019

Reporting Groups	Percentage of students	Avg. score	Percentage at or above *NAEP* Basic	Proficient	Percentage at *NAEP* Advanced
Race/Ethnicity					
White	67	227	73	42	11
Black	10	188	31	11	1
Hispanic	11	208	53	23	5
Asian	5	223	64	35	14
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	198	44	19	3
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	#	‡	‡	‡	‡
Two or more races	5	219	67	36	9
Gender					
Male	51	216	62	32	8
Female	49	224	70	39	10
National School Lunch Program					
Eligible	43	204	49	20	3
Not eligible	56	233	79	48	14

Rounds to zero.
‡ Reporting standards not met.
NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding, and because the "Information not available" category for the National School Lunch Program, which provides free/reduced-price lunches, is not displayed. Black includes African American and Hispanic includes Latino. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin.

Note. 2019 State Reading Results, Fourth Grade, Student Groups. From The Nation's Report Card, by National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022 (https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ltt/?age=9)

These persistent outcomes cause me to reflect on why we have such a low success rate in reading by the end of fourth grade nationwide when so much is known about how children learn to read and the effective pedagogical practices school staff should employ to teach reading.

While K–12 practitioners have been engaged in heated debates about the best approach to teach reading, little attention has been paid to the topic by the general public until the early 2000s when the "science of reading" movement emerged, simultaneously reigniting the "reading wars" among K–12 practitioners. The war about reading expanded to include parents and the general public, largely due to the global pandemic in 2020, which forced many schools to shift from an in-person learning model to a virtual learning model. The virtual learning model provided many parents and caregivers with firsthand knowledge of their student's reading instruction and in many cases exposed students' inability to read well. The following quote from a recent *New York Times* article captures the sentiments of the general public across our country well:

A revolt over how children are taught to read, steadily burning for years, is now sweeping school board meetings and statehouses around the country. The movement, under the banner of "the science of reading" is targeting the education establishment: school district literacy gurus, publishers and colleges of education, which critics say have failed to embrace the cognitive science of how children learn to read (Mervosh, 2023).

While the debate continues about the best way to teach children to read, it is clear that there is a call for improved outcomes in reading for children across the country.

As a district-level leader responsible for teaching and learning, the inability to close the opportunity gap and the nationwide turmoil about reading instruction caused me to dig into literature about how to improve reading outcomes at the primary level. In my initial review, I noted significant research related to the tasks classroom educators, reading specialists,

instructional coaches, and principals should undertake to improve literacy achievement. The existing literature focused on the actions of building-level leaders. I found little research to identify the tasks district-level leaders of teaching and learning should undertake to improve reading outcomes at the primary level.

The lack of research related to district-level leadership for reading instruction was surprising and concerning to me since district-level leaders set the overall instructional agenda for the school district through the allocation of time, instructional resources, professional development, curriculum, and the instructional pedagogy. District-level leaders also have a key role in fostering coherence between school sites within a school district. Ensuring that all children learn to read well by the end of the third grade is a fundamental tenet of public education and a goal that has escaped attainment within our profession for a long time. I believe it will take an aligned commitment from the district level to the classroom to shift the trajectory of reading outcomes, and I believe the district-level leader of teaching and learning plays a pivotal role in that shift.

These beliefs have caused me to wonder what role district-level leaders play in advancing the ability of site-level staff to teach primary-aged children to read well. Specifically, I wonder what I can contribute to the body of research related to the tasks district-level leaders undertake to improve district-wide reading outcomes for all learners. My intent in this research is to provide guidance for district-level leaders in Wisconsin to help students make gains in reading at the primary grade levels, and to determine which leadership tasks undertaken by district-level leaders play a part in improving the literacy results for primary-aged learners.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions:

- What are the essential conditions for literacy achievement at the primary level?
- What are the leadership tasks district-level leaders enact to lead for instructional improvement in reading achievement at the primary grade levels?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as they are used for the purpose of this study.

District-Level Leader of Teaching and Learning: The administrator at the district level with assigned responsibility for the oversight and improvement of student learning outcomes. In the state of Wisconsin, this role is often titled assistant superintendent of teaching and learning, chief academic officer, or director of teaching and learning.

Primary Grades: The primary grades include five-year-old kindergarten, first grade, and second grade.

Reading: The act of looking at printed symbols/words and understanding, or comprehending, their meaning.

Science of Reading: The science of reading is a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related

to reading and writing. The science of reading has become a topic of great discussion over the past several years and has impacted curriculum and instruction initiatives across the country.

Personal Connection

As the assistant superintendent of teaching, learning, and equity for a Wisconsin school district, accountable for improving academic outcomes for 8,500 students by setting the instructional direction for our 1,300 staff, I know firsthand how difficult it is to create and support the essential conditions for reading instruction to occur at the primary grade levels. I started my career as a second-grade classroom teacher in a suburban school district in Indiana, where my nondiverse, middle-class students were quite successful as readers by all measures. I felt a sense of accomplishment and confidence in my ability to teach young children how to read. I moved from Indiana to Colorado and embarked on my second classroom teaching role as a first- and second-grade teacher in a high-poverty, low-achieving school. I erroneously assumed the same teaching strategies I had applied in Indiana would yield high reading outcomes, even though the students in my class in Colorado were different from my students in Indiana with respect to race, socioeconomic status, and primary language. By the end of the first semester, it was clear to me that I was failing to teach my students to read using the strategies I had employed in Indiana, as the students were not making gains in reading instruction. I shifted my teaching strategies and materials to achieve greater success in the subsequent year and a half but still failed to help these students meet the same benchmarks my students in Indiana had met. This experience, coupled with my studies at UW–Madison, shifted my trajectory as an educational leader, as I learned that a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching students to read is ineffective. I am also acutely aware of the urgency to ensure that all students—particularly

students who have been institutionally marginalized—learn to read by the end of third grade for success in life.

Overview of the Study

As a practitioner, I have earnestly sought a way to meet the needs of all learners and to ensure that predictable outcomes for students who have traditionally struggled in school are disrupted. The persistent need for leaders to establish effective literacy programs at the district level has prompted me to undertake this study for two purposes: (1) to improve my ability to lead in my current leadership role in an effort to increase the reading outcomes for all learners in my charge, and (2) to provide guidance for other district-level leaders to enhance their leadership practices to improve reading outcomes for their learners. The information captured in this chapter illuminates my statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research question, and the definition of the terms. In chapter 2, I review the relevant literature relative to the essential conditions for reading achievement and the leadership tasks undertaken by district-level leaders to improve reading outcomes at the primary grade levels. In chapter 3, I outline the design of my research and the qualitative methodologies I employed to gather and analyze data. In chapter 4, I share the findings related to leadership actions that the leaders of the North, South, and East School Districts enacted in service of improving reading outcomes at the 5K–2 level. Some of those findings include establishing and articulating essential/focus standards in reading, establishing and growing data-based decision-making teams focused on reading, leading reading professional development and job-embedded coaching, communicating with stakeholders about reading, and managing staff emotions through the transition from balanced literacy to evidence-based reading instruction. In chapter 5, I share my findings related to the essential conditions needed in order for impactful reading instruction to occur in the primary grades. Finally, in chapter 6, I share my conclusions and recommendations and explore implications for further studies.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature Review

In this chapter, I examine two strands of literature focused on the essential conditions for learning with respect to primary reading programs, and the district-level leadership tasks associated with creating coherence across a system for early reading instruction. The following questions guide this study: (1) What are the essential conditions for literacy achievement at the primary level? (2) What are the leadership tasks that district-level leaders enact to lead for instructional improvement in reading achievement at the primary grade levels? While there is much written about leadership for reading at the site level, student performance data indicates that many districts continue to struggle with literacy achievement outcomes at the primary grades. To understand how districts approach this important work, my literature review will describe (a) the essential conditions for literacy achievement at the primary level and (b) the leadership tasks for instructional improvement in reading achievement at the primary level necessary to create coherence throughout a school system to ensure that the essential conditions for reading exist in all elementary sites.

The first strand of the literature review examines research on the essential conditions for improving reading achievement in schools. It is important to understand the essential conditions that must exist in schools for reading attainment, and this understanding should, in turn, drive the leadership tasks for district-level leaders.

The second strand of the literature review focuses on how leadership actions can increase students' proficiency in reading. Much of the existing body of research focuses heavily on the role of the principal and the site-level leadership tasks associated with increasing reading proficiency. The focus on the leadership tasks associated with literacy achievement at the site level could inform the leadership tasks for district-level leaders as they strive to create coherence across elementary sites throughout the system, but there is a gap in current research

to explicitly target leadership tasks of district-level leaders that could contribute to improving system-wide reading achievement.

The third and final section of this chapter unites these two parts into an account of leadership practices for literacy improvement in schools. I discuss the leadership tasks for district-level leaders to promulgate coherence across district elementary schools with respect to establishing and maintaining the essential conditions for reading instruction at the primary grade levels beyond the current research for leadership at the site level.

A Note about the Literature Review

To conduct this review, I explored the essential conditions for literacy achievement at the primary level and the leadership tasks that district-level leaders undertake to lead instructional improvement in reading achievement at the primary level. To answer my questions, I drew from the research on the essential conditions for reading achievement in the early grades and the leadership practices of site-level and district-level leaders focused on improving reading outcomes for early learners. It is through the convergence of these two fields of study that a thorough review of necessary leadership practices for district-level leaders to improve reading outcomes can take place.

To conduct my literature review in the area of the essential conditions for literacy, I began by searching for relevant journal articles using key terms related to the research strands outlined in my overview of the strands. I also sought the advice of my advisor and colleagues who are entrenched in reading research, inquiring as to which researchers, articles, and books they consider foundational to early reading instruction. I read approximately ninety-five journal articles and utilized half of them to develop this research project. In order to build a strong knowledge base in the research field of reading at the primary levels, I read nine books that were recommended. Of the nine books, I relied heavily on six and partially on three in the development of my research project. Of particular note were the articles on the science of

reading, phonemic awareness, and phonics instruction at the early elementary level. The science of reading is prevalent in the world of K–12 education at this time.

To conduct my literature review in the area of district-level leadership actions to improve literacy outcomes, I searched for relevant journal articles and dissertations. I consulted with my advisor and a colleague who leads the state organization for administrators to seek articles and books they identify as seminal to the work. I read approximately forty journal articles and three books identified through my searches.

After my first round of research and reading in both strands, I examined the citations for the names of researchers that appear repeatedly as a second round of research. I sought out and read the seminal works, articles, and books written by the researchers frequently cited. My goals in this process were twofold: (1) to build a solid understanding of the scope and breadth of the body of work related to essential conditions for reading at the primary level, as well as leadership tasks to promote district-wide coherence in reading instruction, and (2) to seek out areas of commonality and differences among the leading experts in my two areas of study. After two rounds of literature review on both topics, I hit a saturation point. The bibliographies I was reading were pointing me back to the researchers I had already studied. In addition to my review of research, I sought the input of my advisor for additional resources to review, in an attempt to ensure that I did not leave any inadvertent gaps in my review.

After revising my work based on feedback from my advisor, I surveyed a university professor, three assistant superintendents, three directors of instruction, two CESA reading specialists, and two K–12 reading specialists to seek feedback on any gaps in my literature review. Once I received their feedback and did a final review of resources, my last step was to examine the time span of the research I studied to ensure that the majority of my citations were within and over a time span of approximately twenty years. My literature review shows why teaching reading at the primary level district-wide and across all ability levels is nuanced, complex work, and how district-level leaders can create the coherence and provide the support

needed to ensure that the conditions exist for successful reading instruction to occur at the primary level.

<center>**Part 1: Essential Conditions for Literacy Achievement at the Primary Level**</center>

Growing a reader is a nuanced and complex task, and ensuring that all children learn to read well is a critical area of focus in grades K–2 because literacy lays the foundation for all other areas of learning and success in life. For the purpose of this research, I am taking a traditional view of reading and defining it as the act of recognizing and decoding printed symbols/words and understanding, or comprehending, their meaning. In this research, I use the terms *reading* and *literacy* interchangeably since, in general discourse, K–12 educational leaders use the terms to indicate the same thing. The focus of my research is on reading. I am defining primary grade levels as five-year-old kindergarten, first grade, and second grade.

In my thirty-one years as a K–12 practitioner and instructional leader at the elementary level, the "best practices" in reading instruction have been a topic of heated debate. In my undergraduate experience in the late 80s and early 90s, my coursework focused on a whole-language approach to teaching reading, which is a method of teaching children to read by recognizing words in whole pieces of parts. Proponents of the whole-language philosophy believe that language should not be broken down into letters. Instead, they believe that language is a complete system of making meaning, with words functioning in relation to one another in context (Goodman, 1989). The whole-language approach to teaching children to read spread throughout North America with large-scale buy-in from K–12 practitioners as teacher autonomy, a focus on differentiation of learning opportunities, and formative assessment through student observation were on the rise (Pearson, 1989).

As the whole-language movement spread rapidly throughout the country, science tested Goodman's whole-language theory and researchers refuted the concept that words should be studied in whole pieces of parts and in relation to another. Stanovich (1980) argued that "rapid context-free word recognition appears to be the processes that most clearly distinguish good

from poor readers" (p. 38). Rayner, et al. (2002) asserted that "replicated research of eye-movement studies reveal that strong readers process all the information in the word—they don't skip or just read the first letters of a word" (p. 86).

The debate about traditional literacy, or reading wars, rages on today with respect to the best way to teach primary-aged children to read. The continuum spans from the science of reading with an emphasis on phonemic awareness and phonics to a balanced-literacy, immersive approach. While there is continued debate about pedagogical approaches to reading instruction, there is a burgeoning general consensus that a balanced approach for literacy, which includes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, is most effective (National Reading Panel, 2000).

In my review of the literature, six essential key supports (or conditions) for reading achievement to occur emerged among reading researchers. There was general agreement about these conditions as I read articles and books for my literature review. I have selected these six as areas of focus, as they repeatedly resurfaced in the research as consistent themes in the essential conditions for supporting reading. I shared these themes with seven K–12 practitioners and two university professors with extensive background and knowledge in literacy to ensure that I had not omitted conditions they deemed to be essential. The six essential supports (conditions) include: (1) a focus on reading volume with *protected instructional time for students* to read extensively; (2) student *access to texts* that are interesting, culturally relevant, and at their instructional level; (3) promulgating *a love for reading*; (4) *student choice and voice* in what they read; (5) opportunities to practice *listening comprehension*; and (6) effective teaching that includes a *balance of reading experiences and feedback to the reader* on a continuous basis. I consider each of these essential supports in the following sections.

Protected Instructional Time for Literacy

Reading researchers suggest that the amount of protected time allocated to literacy instruction at the primary level has a direct correlation to reading achievement. In Gee's (2003)

research on new media learning and literacy, he states: "Children cannot learn in a deep way if they have no opportunities to practice what they are learning" (p. 65). According to Krashen (2004), success in reading is directly related to the time a person spends reading, citing 93% of the tests on reading comprehension that collect data on the volume of reading indicate that students who are given more time to read do better. Allington (2012) states:

> It would seem that the consistency of the evidence concerning the relationship of volume of reading and reading achievement is surely strong enough to support recommending attention to reading volume as a central feature of the design of any intervention focused on improving reading achievement. (p. 53)

While consensus does not exist for the actual number of minutes per day for reading instruction, most agree that approximately one and a half hours, or one-fourth of a primary student's instructional day, should be focused on engaged reading (Allington, 2012; Cunningham & Allington, 2016; Krashen, 2004).

In addition to allocating and protecting time in the instructional day, attention must be paid to ensuring that students spend their time engaged in authentic reading tasks. Calkins et al. (2015) states:

> The single most important thing we can do, then, to make schools into places where youngsters thrive as readers is to clear out the time and space so that children can learn to read by reading. This means shoveling out the busy work; in some classrooms, when children are not actually meeting with a teacher in a small guided reading group, they are spinning dials and shaking dice to play letter-sound games, drawing pictures of word cards, or circling right answers on worksheets. (p. 18)

It is clear that the amount of time a student spends actually reading directly impacts their reading achievement.

Access to a Variety of Texts with Increasing Complexity

In addition to the time spent on reading, access to books that primary students read has an impact on a student's reading achievement. A well-stocked classroom library includes a large number of books that are accessible enough that primary students can spend large chunks of time engaged in high-success reading. Careful attention must be paid to include books that are aligned to grade-level standards along with books for students not yet at grade level and those students beyond the grade level (Allington, 2012; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). According to Calkins (2015), students need a combination of fiction and nonfiction, culturally relevant, and high-interest books to experience high-success reading, which is "characterized by a student's ability to read with high levels of accuracy, fluency and comprehension" (p. 18). Similarly, Fountas and Pinnell (2012) state:

> To become proficient readers, students must experience successful processing daily. Not only should they be able to read books independently, building interest, stamina and fluency: they also need to tackle harder books that provide the opportunity to grow more skillful as a reader. (p. 268)

Access to appropriate, leveled, high-interest books are a foundational component in a reading classroom.

For students in five-year-old-kindergarten and first grade, classroom libraries must have a significant number of decodable texts. Decodable texts support students as they practice reading by using a continuous and meaningful text that contains a large percentage of words that incorporate the letter-sound relationships necessary for orthographic mapping. Orthographic mapping is the most current, well-researched, and replicated scientific model of how the brain recognizes words by sight, which involves the formation of letter-sound connections to bond the spellings, pronunciations, and meanings of specific words to memory. It is the process by which students learn to read words by sight, to spell words from memory, and to acquire vocabulary words from print (Ehri, 2014). The decodable text collection in five-year-old-kindergarten and first-grade classroom libraries must increase in complexity to

grow the students' reading abilities as they learn more of the phonetic code. Decodable texts are a specific component of a classroom library in five-year-old-kindergarten and first-grade classrooms because of the pivotal roles phonemic awareness and phonics instruction play in early reading. Without access to decodable texts, young readers learn to follow the patterns in books and to utilize context clues, but they do not grow in the word-attack skills necessary for success in the later stages of reading when decoding words become more complex (Justice et al., 2006; Muter et al., 2004).

Reading researchers suggest that students grow as readers when they spend time engaged in a variety of texts at increasingly complex levels. The growing body of research on the science of reading suggests that among those texts decodable texts are foundational for reading to occur at the kindergarten and first-grade levels.

An Environment That Promulgates a Love for Literacy

Readers' growth in literacy is directly connected to the amount of time they spend actually reading. In order to motivate primary-aged students to engage in reading and for extended periods of time, it is important to create a learning environment that promotes a love of literacy and to develop the habits of a lifelong reader.

Learners enter primary-level classrooms with a variety of literacy experiences and beliefs about their ability to read and write (Kittle, 2020). According to Miller (2002), in order to develop a love of literacy, educators need to create conditions in the learning environment that lead to high levels of student engagement, which is accomplished when students (1) discover a personal value and need in reading, (2) see teachers model a love for literacy through read-aloud experiences, and (3) receive encouragement to continuously engage in authentic classroom community experiences in reading and writing where they make meaningful contributions to the group (pp. 34–35).

The research clearly suggests that promulgating a love for literacy will increase the time students spend reading, which will, in turn, increase their ability to read well.

Student Choice in Book Selection

Beyond providing a well-stocked, multileveled, culturally-relevant classroom library, educators must allow student choice in what students are reading. Choice is important, as it is largely related to student interest, self-efficacy, and cultural relevance. When primary students are focused on reading about particular topics and/or characters in which they are personally interested, they tend to pay closer attention, persist in the act of reading for longer periods of time, and learn more than readers who are not engaged in reading books of high interest (Allington, 2012; Miller, 2002).

Sims-Bishop (1990) highlights the importance of classroom materials being inclusive of culturally relevant books through her concept of books serving as "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors." She posits that including books in classroom libraries that represent all cultures allows all children to see themselves, their culture, values, attitudes, and customs as an integral part of the classroom community (mirror). Culturally relevant books are of equal importance for members of the dominant culture in the classroom community so that they can look through the "window" of the book to come to know people whose culture is different from their own, so that they can avoid ethnocentrism, and so that they have a "sliding glass door" through which they can enter other cultural worlds (pp. 6–8).

Ladson-Billings supports a similar line of thinking through her research by arguing that culturally relevant books are essential in classroom libraries for several reasons, including representation that validates students' identities and perceived value in the classroom; deeper engagement through interest in books that resonate with their own lives, which results in a deeper connection to the text; critical thinking through the exposure of diverse perspectives, which challenges readers to analyze and evaluate different viewpoints; and increased cultural competence as readers learn to appreciate and respect different cultures, fostering empathy and empowerment (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Gay (2022) identifies culturally relevant classroom libraries as essential to the success of all students in the classroom:

> U.S. education has not been very culturally responsive to ethnically diverse students. Instead, these students have been expected to divorce themselves from their cultures and learning according to European American cultural norms. This places them in double jeopardy—having to master the academic tasks while functioning under cultural conditions unnatural (and often unfamiliar) to them. Removing this second burden is a significant contribution to improving their academic achievement. (p. 114)

In addition to choice in what they are reading, choice with whom and where they are reading is another contributing factor to primary students' reading achievement. Allington (2012), indicates:

> Ensuring students had easy access to interesting texts was the most influential factor in student reading growth; providing choices for students over what to read, who to read with, and where to read produced an effect size nearly as large as access to interesting texts. (p. 73)

Clear consensus in the research exists to support the need for student choice in book selection to ensure culturally relevant teaching, the development of critical-thinking skills, and increased engagement.

Opportunities to Practice Listening Comprehension

Another important component of early reading is listening comprehension. According to Hogan, et al. (2014), this aspect of reading is sometimes overlooked. The researchers indicate that the simple view of reading draws attention to the primary components for reading comprehension: word recognition (decoding) and listening comprehension. While both are important, the focus has been skewed toward decoding, and the importance of listening comprehension has garnered less attention. As students are learning to read, they must be exposed to instructional read-aloud to practice listening comprehension in order to understand the language structures and vocabulary that make up what they hear. Consensus exists in the

research that listening comprehension is an essential precondition of reading comprehension (Burkins and Yates, 2021, Davis, 2024, and Hogan et al., 2014):

> By listening comprehension, we are not referring to how well children follow directions or to how well they can sit for us to offer long explanations. We are referring, instead, to their capacity to understand spoken language. This capacity develops through conversation, through hearing and sharing personal stories, and through interactions with rich texts. All of this exposes children to new ideas, new language structures, new vocabulary, and new concepts, until they can access it for themselves by reading increasingly complex texts. (p. 11)

Research suggests the intentional teaching of oracy skills by engaging students in listening to and speaking about texts through shared reading and read-alouds followed by whole group and small group discussion is foundational for the growth of early readers. The dialogue that occurs in whole-group and small-group discussion gives early readers opportunities to practice with language, which increases their ability to understand the words they read (Bortnam, 2008).

In addition to growing in comprehension, early readers engaged in instructional read-aloud will grow in their foundational skills and fluency. Phonemic awareness is an important skill for early readers as they learn to identify individual sounds in words and to connect those sounds to the letters in the alphabet. Listening to sounds through read-aloud provides early readers opportunities to grow in their phonemic awareness. Reading fluency, the ability to read accurately and quickly, is another important skill to be developed in primary-grade readers, as it provides a framework for the concentration of the meaning of a text as a whole. Providing opportunities for students to practice listening comprehension through read-aloud gives them repeated opportunities to hear good fluency modeled, and it exposes them to vocabulary and concepts (Davis, 2024).

The consensus is clear among many researchers that a focus on listening comprehension is foundational for effective reading instruction.

Effective Teaching and Feedback

Researchers suggest that students at the early stages of reading need expert, explicit teaching and feedback in their zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development is defined as the space between what a learner can do without assistance and what a learner can do with adult guidance or in cooperation with more capable peers (Justice et al., 2006; Muter et al., 2004).

It is widely accepted and supported by research that in order for effective teaching to occur in a primary classroom, children need balanced reading instruction in five foundational skills. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), the five areas of recommended curriculum for reading instruction include the following:

- Phonemic awareness: the ability to identify and play with individual sounds in spoken words

- Phonics: understanding how letters and groups of letters link to sounds to form letter-sound relationships and spelling patterns

- Fluency: the ability to read words, phrases, sentences, and stories correctly, with speed and expression

- Vocabulary: knowing what words mean and how to say and use them correctly

- Comprehension: the ability to understand what you are reading

Once students have a basic understanding of the concepts of print and orthographic mapping, they need to be taught reading strategies to gain meaning from the author's text and to increase fluency (Ehri, 2014; Rupley et al., 2009).

Research suggests that efficacious reading instruction occurs when teachers provide direct and explicit instruction to students. According to Rupley et al., (2009):

[S]tudents do not become independent learners through maturation. Directly/explicitly teaching reading means imparting new information to students through meaningful teacher-student interactions and teacher guidance of student learning. Successful

teachers, teachers whose students consistently outperform their peers, rely on instructional flexibility so they can provide explicit instruction to struggling learners who need the additional modeling and support. (p. 126)

Rosenshine and Stevens (1995) identified the following six instructional functions, which form the core of recommended steps for direct or explicit instruction:

- Review and check previous work to relate the new learning and information to past learning.

- Present new material to grow the reader's skill.

- Provide guided practice to model step-by-step explanations as the reader begins the new skill with the teacher being in control of the learning in a structured manner.

- Provide feedback and corrections in a dynamic manner as the student is initially mastering the skill.

- Provide independent practice to allow the student to routinize the skill.

- Provide weekly and monthly reviews to ensure the reading skills taught are automatic and build upon one another to allow for reading comprehension. (pp. 262–267)

Expert, explicit instruction with multiple opportunities to practice and targeted feedback are key to growing an effective reader.

Central to the effectiveness of direct and explicit instruction are active communication, the maintenance of a high-quality relationship, and frequent interactions between the learner and educator. It is essential for the educator to shift their teaching moves to be either more or less structured as they scaffold and respond to the student's present level of reading ability, stretching the student's thinking to the next step in the progression of skills and strategies that proficient readers employ (Villaume & Brabham, 2003).

As I study the literature in service of answering my first research question (What are the essential conditions for literacy achievement at the primary level?), current scholarship suggests that there are essential conditions related to literacy instruction that must be in place to support

the content and pedagogy of reading instruction. In this first part of the chapter, I have identified the six essential conditions that researchers identify as foundational. In the next part of this chapter, I explore how district-level leaders engage in leadership tasks to ensure that the essential conditions for learning exist at the site level district-wide.

Part 2: Leadership Practices for Instructional Improvement in Reading Achievement

Instructional leaders have a significant impact on the reading achievement of primary students. I have identified four leadership practices (tasks) as areas of focus, as they repeatedly resurfaced in the research as consistent themes for leaders attempting to improve reading outcomes. Utilizing a similar approach to the process I used to identify the six essential conditions for reading achievement, I identified four themes that repeatedly emerged in my review of the existing research. Once I identified these four practices (tasks), I shared them with seven K–12 practitioners and two university professors with extensive background and knowledge in literacy to ensure that I had not omitted practices (tasks) they deemed to be essential. Research suggests that school districts who effectively teach children to read have (1) trained their instructional leaders to take a systemic approach to literacy reform, (2) established and maintained a data-driven culture around literacy, (3) provided continuous professional learning for staff, anchored in the district approach to literacy, and (4) prioritized the allocation of adequate resources for reading instruction. In the next section, I explore the key aspects and district-level leadership tasks that lead to district-wide literacy reform impacting teaching and learning for reading at the site level. I argue that reading outcomes will increase if schools employ research-based content and pedagogy while also ensuring that the essential conditions are in place for reading instruction to occur across the system in all primary schools. I posit that the leadership tasks of district-level leaders in establishing those essential conditions for learning have the potential to be impactful and are in need of further study.

District Leaders Lead with a Systemic Approach to Literacy Reform

Scholarship has shown that district-wide coherence to improve academic outcomes in reading must have a clear focus on teaching and learning that begins with a district-wide vision for literacy instruction and system-wide literacy curricula that connect to standards that provide teachers with clear expectations about what to teach (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Beyond a clear mission, vision, and instructional framework for literacy, research indicates that district leaders must ensure that working conditions are such that the implementation of the instructional framework for literacy is not inhibited by schedules, instructional materials, resources, or a lack of adequate appropriately-skilled staff. The absence of these working conditions lead to fragmentation and a weak implementation of the intended literacy framework (Madda et al., 2007). Newmann et al. (2001) articulate this thinking well in the following statement:

> Research has documented the importance of school organizational factors such as a unity of purpose, a clear focus and shared values for student learning. Research has also drawn attention to the problem of incoherent school programs, where diverse initiatives are set up to serve important needs, but which lack the sustained attention of the majority of staff within the school, have no apparent effects on the core goal of improving student achievement. (p. 13)

McGloghlin and Talbert (2003) refer to this instructional coherence as the district operating as a single unit of change through district-level strategic planning by a central office team that is continually improving its support of schools' reform through data-based inquiry and learning.

Research suggests that district-wide coherence in literacy instruction is realized through a clearly identified mission and vision for literacy; an instructional framework to guide curriculum, teaching, and assessments of and for literacy; and learning conditions to provide focus on literacy and a clear direction for staff district-wide. Once the literacy mission and vision are clearly identified, district leaders should include the literacy mission and vision in high-profile

documents throughout the system to ensure that daily decision-making across the system related to literacy is aligned with the district's instructional direction (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Knap et al., 2003; Madda et al., 2007; Newmann et al., 2001; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Research suggests that many districts who have a clear literacy mission and vision and an aligned direction have experienced overall student growth in reading.

Research has also drawn attention to the need for educational leaders, at the district and site levels, to maintain a focus on identified literacy initiatives and a small number of priorities that support the literacy mission, vision, and instructional framework while deflecting initiatives and distractions that can cause the system to fragment. It is suggested that district leaders must also delegate leadership tasks for literacy throughout the organization at all levels to guide the thoughts and actions of all stakeholders who are interacting with students (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Scholarship has shown that once literacy standards are collaboratively established and communicated broadly, site level leaders should hold all staff to high expectations to meet those literacy standards and should provide the necessary support for educator practices to improve, which will result in improved outcomes for students in literacy (Gallucci, 2008; Heck & Hallinger, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Murphy, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Hammond and Murphy draw attention to the need for instructional leaders at the site level to create a climate conducive to high expectations for reading achievement, with the school principal playing a pivotal role in that work. Site instructional leaders establish a positive academic learning climate by actively working with staff to define high academic and behavioral expectations in reading for all students, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, and/or gender (Hammond, 2014; Murphy, 2004).

School districts have many agenda items competing for their time, attention, and resources. Research suggests that in order to improve academic outcomes for learners, district

leaders need to protect sites from distractions so that they can remain focused on teaching and learning through a systemic approach to literacy reform.

District Leaders Establish and Maintain a Data-Driven Culture around Literacy

Research has drawn attention to the need for instructional leaders for literacy at the site and district level to establish and maintain a data-driven culture around literacy, as teaching children to read is a complex, nuanced task that will not be accomplished without careful data analysis, staff collaboration, and instructional planning. According to Best and Dunlap (2014):

> In education, continuous improvement can refer to a school, district, or other organization's ongoing commitment to quality improvement efforts that are evidence-based, integrated into the daily work of individuals, contextualized within a system, and iterative. At the classroom level, continuous improvement may refer to using timely, accurate data to regularly inform and improve teacher practice. At a school or district level, continuous improvement may refer to ongoing efforts to improve operational practices and processes related to efficiency, effectiveness, and student outcomes. In all cases, continuous improvement involves a cyclical approach to problem solving: it allows relevant actors to reflect on their work, identify problem areas, pilot potential solutions to those problems, observe and evaluate interventions, and adapt interventions based on data collected (p. 1–2).

Research suggests that establishing and maintaining a data-driven culture around literacy through site and district leadership actions is necessary in order to improve literacy outcomes and that it will require a culture shift if this work is not already embedded within the system. Research reveals that effective instructional leaders should catalyze the shift to continuous improvement by creating a psychologically safe environment and building the capacity of all the actors in the system to engage in studying and continuously improving their work (Dixon & Palmer, 2020; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Park, et. al, 2013; Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004).

At the district level, directors of teaching and learning should prioritize an equity audit as a strategy to identify district priorities in service of promoting educational equity and social justice. Data routinely indicates that institutionally marginalized students perform at lower rates on reading outcomes than their peers, and that a district-wide equity audit is essential for assessing the extent to which schools and districts are meeting the needs of all students, particularly those who have been historically marginalized or underserved. Capper and Frattura (2007) suggest that equity audits should go beyond merely examining demographic data to also include analysis of policies, practices, and procedures that impact reading programming. They advocate for a comprehensive approach to data analysis that considers factors such as access to rigorous coursework, distribution of resources, and the inclusiveness of school culture and climate. They emphasize that equity audits should be conducted with a critical lens, questioning assumptions and challenging existing structures and systems that perpetuate inequities to catalyze action and drive meaningful change toward more equitable outcomes for all students (pp. 48–49).

With respect to site-level data, research indicates that formative and summative assessments in literacy should be linked to individual student performance, not outcomes. Reading assessments that are aligned with the district's literacy approach should be conducted over multiple points in time with various texts and purposes and should measure a wide range of skills in several formats (Afflerbach, 2005). Assessment strategies, including running records with a focus on visual cueing systems, conferring, and reader observations, are central to knowing students' reading progress and achievement. The assessment data supports the teachers' ability to ascertain how their students are developing as readers, which is critical information for making important "next step" instructional decisions for individual readers (Afflerbach, 2017).

Scholarship has shown that instructional leaders for reading at the site level promulgate staff collaboration for continuous improvement by protecting time for staff to engage in the

action steps necessary for continuous improvement. During this collaborative time, principals, coaches, and classroom educators should come together to share their knowledge of their learners and seek to understand their learners' passions, strengths, and skills related to the essential reading standards. Research suggests that the team of site experts should determine strategies they will employ with their learners in large groups, small groups, and individually as they engage in learning in classrooms. The team should serve as constant, collective inquirers in partnership with the learners to study which strategies effectively impact student reading performance for individual students (Dixon & Palmer, 2020; Park, et. al, 2013).

Research has shown that as classroom educators engage with learners, site instructional leaders for literacy should monitor student progress in the areas of reading actively through a combination of classroom-level assessments, grade-level universal assessments, and externally moderated standardized assessments. In addition to ensuring that assessments are in place, leaders should share assessment results with the staff in a timely fashion, along with a process to interpret the data in a manner that provides direction for subsequent teaching and learning goals through collaborative meeting time (Murphy, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Zmuda et al., 2004). It is important to note that the analysis of aggregate reading data will not be enough to close the opportunity gap for institutionally marginalized students in grades 5K–2. Reading data must be disaggregated prior to analysis in order to identify achievement disparities between institutionally marginalized groups and the dominant group; plan targeted, culturally responsive instructional strategies to grow the reading ability of diverse groups of students; track the effectiveness of strategies and interventions over time with specific student focus groups; equitably allocate resources to support the learning needs of diverse learners; and hold all educators accountable for student performance across different groups (Roegman et al., 2018, Anderson et al., 2010).

Research has drawn attention to the fact that district instructional leaders continuously need to monitor reading performance data through a multimeasure accountability system,

sharing their celebrations and concerns for reading achievement with site leaders and holding

the adults with whom students are working accountable for the results. In addition to maintaining

high learning expectations for literacy, site-level instructional leaders should also maintain high

visibility in the learning environment and during instructional planning meetings, providing public

praise and acknowledgment for students and teams making progress in the area of reading

achievement. In an effort to support complex, systemic change, district leaders must protect and

support site leaders as they navigate the continuous improvement of reading outcomes (Best &

Dunlap, 2014; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Teaching children to read is a challenging task, which means that using our first

instructional approach will likely not yield success for every child. The need for continuous

improvement processes will provide one way for district leaders to iterate and seek greater

reading outcomes for more students.

District Leaders Plan and Provide Continuous Professional Learning for Staff, Anchored

in the District's Approach to Literacy

Research has documented that district and site instructional leaders who increase

reading achievement provide and promote continuous professional learning opportunities for

their teams, anchored in the district's approach to literacy and instructional planning.

Professional learning opportunities should be research based and connected to the instructional

vision for reading and student data. Research suggests that efficacious professional learning is

inclusive of district leaders, principals, teacher leaders, and support staff to form a network of

instructional experts who rely on one another, as opposed to leading and/or teaching reading in

isolation (Fisher et al., 2012; Joyce & Showers, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Murphy,

2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Research has drawn attention to the need for instructional leaders at the site level to

plan and provide professional learning about reading that is gradual and that builds early

success through sustained, job-embedded professional development that is customized and

sustained over time. This includes frequent opportunities (weekly and/or biweekly) for site teams to collaborate as professionals to examine how the strategic actions they are implementing with students are impacting short-term literacy student achievement outcomes. In addition to frequent, short-term professional development, leaders need to plan for more in-depth periodic professional development (monthly and/or quarterly) for longer periods of time to deepen educators' knowledge of content and pedagogy, and to provide staff an opportunity to analyze student work and make adjustments to their instructional approaches based on the student artifacts they are reviewing (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin,1995; Guskey,1986).

In the literature, it is widely accepted that a critical element for district and site leaders to consider when planning system-wide professional development for staff in service of primary-age literacy achievement is to ensure that professional learning is well-anchored in reading content and pedagogical knowledge. Research reveals that an efficacious district-wide professional development plan for reading includes learning opportunities for educators to deepen their knowledge in balanced-literacy instruction, including phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, as well as methods and strategies to teach those content areas. It is essential that the content of professional development leads educators to a reasonable level of cognitive dissonance, which will prompt them to question their current methods and beliefs about literacy instruction (Garret et al., 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Research also draws attention to the need for district-wide and site-based professional development planning and opportunities that are based on constructivist principles and that honor teacher autonomy by supporting those who are most closely aligned to the learners to take risks and test out ideas about reading instruction. Time and space in system-wide continuous reading professional development sessions should encourage and promulgate reflection on teacher practices in reading instruction, debate about teacher issues, and decisions about instructional next steps with early readers with the support of a facilitator who is

well-versed in literacy and the change process. According to Kennedy and Shiel (2010), "this approach encourages teachers to experiment and innovate in ways that suit their personality and teaching style while also honoring an overall framework and structure for best practice in literacy" (p. 376). Research suggests that striking the balance of a systemic approach to content and reading pedagogy while allowing the educators to respond to their early readers through a learner-centered focus at the classroom level will result in greater outcomes in literacy achievement at the primary level (Cambourne, 2002; Fisher et al., 2012).

Joyce and Showers (2002) identify coaching as an important component of professional development for the transfer of training into practice and the development of organizational norms of experimentation and collegiality.They identify five key contributions that coaching makes to the transfer of learning:

- Coached teachers practice new strategies more often and with greater skill than uncoached educators with initial training.
- Coached teachers adapt the strategies more appropriately to their own goals and contexts than uncoached teachers who tend to practice observed or demonstrated lessons.
- Coached teachers retain and increase their skill over time. Uncoached teachers do not.
- Coached teachers are more likely to explain the new models of teaching to their students, ensuring that students understand the purpose of the strategy and the behaviors expected of them.
- Coached teachers demonstrate a clearer understanding of the purposes and the use of the new strategies. The frequent peer discussions about them, including lessons and materials design, seem to enable them to "think" with the strategies in ways that uncoached teachers never show. (p. 3)

A system-wide expectation of student-centered coaching for literacy creates an environment where peers work and assist one another in changing their instructional moves as a strategy to increase reading outcomes (Sweeney & Harris, 2016).

Teaching children to read is a nuanced and complex task for site-level staff to undertake. Continuous professional development in content and reading pedagogy along with time for site-level staff to plan and collaborate on reading instruction will better equip educators to meet the needs of their early readers, thus increasing reading outcomes.

District Leaders Prioritize the Allocation of Adequate Resources for Reading Instruction

District-level leaders should prioritize and allocate adequate resources for reading instruction, including a consistent and viable reading curriculum and protected time for literacy instruction.

Research emphasizes the importance of district-level and site-level instructional leaders for literacy, ensuring a coordinated and consistent curriculum connected to standards, with clear expectations about what teachers are to teach during reading instruction throughout the district and schools. In schools where reading achievement gains are realized, site leaders promote and monitor learning objectives, instructional materials, and reading assessments in each grade level and across grade levels (Murphy, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). The characteristics of a consistent and viable reading curriculum include an articulated curriculum and related assessments that align to essential English language arts standards; a reading curriculum focused enough to be adequately addressed in the time available to teachers; access and opportunity for all early readers to engage in critical content reading; and clear, measurable reading goals that identify targeted needs regarding improving overall student achievement in reading (Eaker & Marzano, 2020).

In addition to articulating a consistent and viable curriculum, research suggests that site leaders must engage in continuous supervision and evaluation to manage the day-to-day educational functioning of reading instruction. Classroom observation structures and protocols

anchored in the district's approach to literacy should be in place to ensure that the system-wide reading goals translate into impactful practice at the site level and classroom level throughout the district. The learning objectives and teaching practices for reading at the classroom level must be monitored by site leaders to ensure consistency for all early readers with targeted, authentic feedback provided by instructional leaders (Calkins, et. al, 2019; Gaullucci, 2008; Heck & Hallinger, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Murphy, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Research also focuses on time as a precious resource in school. Time is often allocated on a classroom-by-classroom basis, which may result in widely varied reading instruction and outcomes. Instructional leaders for literacy at the site and district level need to allocate, articulate, and protect instructional time for reading instruction daily in early primary students' schedules to increase reading achievement (Allington, 2012; Calkins, et. al, 2019; Murphy, 2004). According to Murphy (2004):

> In the area of time allocation, research shows that effective principals improve time usage in four ways: setting time allocations for reading in all classes, ensuring coordination of time usage among teachers (e.g., all teachers teach reading first period), allocating more time for instruction (and less time for non-instructional activities), and providing more time for instruction in basic skills. (p. 30)

Allington's (2012) research supports this thinking:

> To ensure that all students read a lot, schools need to develop standards for the expected volume of reading (and writing). All teachers must understand the enormous benefit that enhancing the volume of reading will provide. In such a plan there would be long blocks of uninterrupted time for reading and writing. (p. 66)

In addition to allocated and protected instructional time for reading, research suggests that the classroom teacher's ability to manage the use of the time to best meet the needs of the students in the classroom is of equal importance. Effective reading instruction is not one-size-fits-all and thus calls for a complex interplay of a variety of instructional strategies.

Teachers must have both adequate time and autonomy within the literacy block to tailor instruction for the whole class, for small groups, and for individual instruction based on their assessment of the students' instructional needs (Blase & Blase, 2000). It is clear that allocating instructional minutes to the most essential tasks in reading is important to ensure that students grow as readers.

In this section of my paper, I have argued that several district-level leadership actions have an impact on the reading outcomes at the primary grade levels. Research indicates that instructional coherence to improve reading outcomes begins at the highest levels of the district through a systemic approach to literacy reform. District leaders need to establish and maintain a data-driven culture around literacy because teaching children to read is a multifaceted endeavor that an educator may not be successful with in their first round of instructional strategies. District leaders need to ensure that staff are well-equipped to teach students to read by offering professional development anchored in the district's approach to literacy instruction that is rich in content and pedagogy and by providing clarity for what should be taught by creating and maintaining a viable reading curriculum. Finally, district leaders need to allocate and protect adequate resources for literacy instruction, as schools have many competing agendas to balance.

Part 3: Synthesizing the Literature

While significant research exists related to effective reading instruction for primary-age students and the site leadership practices that exist to promulgate student success in reading, important issues still need further study. The literature has illuminated the essential conditions that must exist for reading achievement to occur at the primary grades along with leadership tasks that site-level leaders should undertake; however, less research exists to adequately describe the leadership tasks needed at the district level specific to reading in order to create coherence across a district that will result in high levels of reading achievement at the primary grade levels. In my review of the current research, a plethora of information exists about

leadership tasks for site-level instructional leaders, including principals, coaches, reading specialists, classroom teachers, etc. Less research currently exists with specific leadership tasks for district-level leadership in service of improving district-wide reading outcomes at the primary level. In my own research, I attempt to fill this gap in the literature by studying and identifying the leadership tasks of district-level leaders who create the conditions for reading achievement to grow at the primary level.

Urgency exists to improve literacy outcomes for students, as the outcomes across our nation are concerning for at least half of students at the early elementary grade levels and are alarming for our institutionally marginalized students, particularly students of color in the state of Wisconsin. Less than adequate reading outcomes continue to threaten our country's fundamental commitment to democracy, which hinges on a literate, educated citizenry. The most recent improvement efforts revolve around brain research and the science of reading at the early grade levels.

While I respect the burgeoning research related to the science of reading and what it means for early literacy, I do not believe the application of that research alone will solve the issues of students' inability to read proficiently. In addition to shifting classroom pedagogy based on research, I argue that the role of district-level leaders in improving reading outcomes is of equal importance, and space in the research exists with respect to district-level leadership tasks for reading. I recognize that reading outcomes are changed at the classroom level and in the space between classroom educators and the students, but I argue that the leadership tasks for reading (or lack thereof) at the district level either promote or inhibit the site-level staff to effectively teach students to read. In my experience as a district-level leader of teaching and learning in two Midwestern school districts, and as a literacy consultant for more than twenty school districts across southeast Wisconsin, I have seen firsthand the variety of leadership practices that exist (or do not exist) at the district level, which I believe is due in part to the lack of research and clarity around specific leadership tasks for reading at the district level.

Research that more deeply studies the leadership tasks specific to literacy at the district level through a case study could provide insights for all districts seeking improvement in reading outcomes. Specifically, this research could provide clarity and possible direction for district-level leaders who are being pulled in multiple directions while simultaneously under the microscope due to the reading wars that have resurfaced over the past few years from growing brain research and failing reading outcomes. By establishing common leadership tasks for literacy at the district level, districts can ensure coherence and alignment of systems to yield improved reading results for all children.

In this literature review, I have argued that we know a lot about the conditions that promulgate reading achievement at the early elementary level and the leadership tasks for site-level instructional leaders. Limited knowledge exists about leadership tasks for district-level leaders to undertake to create system-wide coherence to maintain a focus on instruction. Overall, very little knowledge exists about the interplay of the two topics to identify the leadership actions district-level leaders should undertake to specifically focus on improving reading outcomes at the primary grade level. I suggest that the urgency to improve literacy outcomes compels us to study the tasks that district-level leaders could undertake to create the coherence needed to improve literacy outcomes across the system for all learners, particularly for students who are institutionally marginalized. The majority of the research I reviewed on this topic focuses on the tasks of the site-level leaders, including principals, coaches, and teachers. I seek to expand the research by focusing on the leadership tasks of district-level leaders in service of improving district-wide reading outcomes at the primary grade levels.

I have arrived at my position on this topic through a review of the literature on each of the strands and through a search for literature on the interplay of the topics. After my review, I believe that further exploration is needed and that much is to be gained through that exploration with respect to improving reading outcomes for primary-age students. While there is significant focus on site and classroom practices, I believe the research has largely ignored the role that

district-level leadership plays in promoting or prohibiting the teaching and learning necessary for young children to learn to read. I argue that ignoring the role of the district-level leader is a significant misstep within the multipronged approach it will take to remedy our country's long-standing poor outcomes in reading. Illuminating the role of the district leader and pairing it with the actions of site-level leaders will better position improvement efforts to be impactful with respect to reading outcomes, which will be captured in a guidance document for district-level leaders striving to improve reading outcomes.

To that end, I conducted a qualitative comparative analysis of three districts who are making gains in reading achievement for all students, including students in institutionally marginalized populations at the primary level. I have identified district-level leadership tasks specific to literacy through an internal examination of district artifacts and observations, and through interviews with district-level and site-level leaders of teaching and learning.

My intent in writing this study is to have it serve as a starting point for integrating the work of the essential conditions for literacy achievement, and to offer guidance on specific district leadership tasks that district-level leaders may undertake to contribute to improved reading outcomes at the primary level. Other research studies could consider how this work can be expanded to include other actors in the school environment and grade-level bands beyond the primary grades.

CHAPTER 3: Research Methodology and Design

Introduction of Methods

A significant amount of time and resources have been devoted to studying how a child learns to read, the best teaching and learning strategies for literacy, and the essential conditions necessary to grow readers in the early grades in school. Research also exists to highlight the impact that a school-level leader of teaching and learning can have on instructional outcomes in literacy. In my role as an assistant superintendent of teaching, learning, and equity, I (along with many other district leaders in similar roles) am striving to improve outcomes in reading at the primary grade levels. In order to achieve that goal, I need to understand the leadership tasks that district-level leaders enact to lead for instructional improvement in reading achievement at the primary grade levels.

Some research exists related to district-level leadership tasks to improve literacy, including the following action steps: taking a systemic approach to literacy reform; establishing and maintaining a data-driven culture around literacy; providing continuous professional learning for staff, anchored in the district approach to literacy; and prioritizing the allocation of adequate resources for reading instruction. Additional research exists to support six practices that should be in place to support reading instruction, including: (1) a focus on reading volume with protected instructional time for students to read extensively; (2) student access to texts that are interesting, culturally relevant, and at their instructional level; (3) the promulgation of a love for literacy; (4) student choice and voice in what they read; (5) opportunities to practice listening comprehension; and (6) effective teaching that includes a balance of reading experiences and feedback to the reader on a continuous basis.

Through a qualitative comparative case analysis, this study explores the strategic tasks a district leader undertakes to create and sustain the essential conditions for reading growth to occur. Insights into the overlap of the tasks and the essential conditions will provide much needed information for Wisconsin school district leaders who consistently struggle to improve

reading outcomes for approximately half of the students in their districts at the primary grade levels. By seeking to understand the overlap and establishing a leadership for literacy guidebook for the continuous improvement of reading outcomes for district-level leaders to improve reading instruction at the primary grade levels, I will contribute to the body of research to assist K–12 district-level practitioners in better understanding their role in improving literacy outcomes at the K–2 grade level.

A Qualitative Comparative Analysis

I conducted my research through a qualitative comparative analysis to answer my research questions: (1) What are the essential conditions for literacy achievement at the primary level? (2) What are the leadership tasks that district-level leaders enact to lead for instructional improvement in reading achievement at the primary grade levels? According to Merriam & Tisdell (2015), "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to those experiences" (p. 5). This approach is a good fit for research that compares the tasks undertaken by district-level leaders who have experienced success in increasing reading achievement at the primary level in order to understand how they interpret their experiences as they construct K–12 systems and the meaning they attribute to those experiences.

According to Masue et al. (2013), qualitative comparative analysis focuses on explicit connections between conditions through a systematic analysis of similarities and differences across cases:

> [Comparative analysis] is used in macro social studies; or what other scholars call "macroscopic comparative analyses" to examine the conditions under which a state of affairs is realized. . . . [T]he analysis of cases, at various levels, follow each other, providing for examination of cases from different angles. (p. 215)

Drawing on the work of Masue et al., I explored and investigated three school districts (cases) through detailed, in-depth data collection at various levels and involving multiple sources of

information, including interviews, district artifacts, and observations. I focused on the work of district-level leaders of teaching and learning. I gathered information relevant to the district leader's leadership tasks that promote the growth of reading achievement at the primary level. I studied the unit (district leader of teaching and learning) at each of the three school districts to create a description and themes of the leadership tasks within each district. Then I applied a spread-it-out technique to conduct a cross-case review of the three districts to find out how much variety exists and what centrally explains the data I gathered (Richards, 2020). While I could have studied a single case to determine leadership actions, I determined it was best to study three cases due to the complex nature of school leadership and the impact that local control has on each district. An effective leadership strategy in one district may not be as impactful in another district. My intent in studying multiple cases was to look for common leadership practices that may be impactful for all similarly sized and similarly positioned districts.

I studied three Wisconsin school districts with student enrollments of 3,000–10,000 to increase the likelihood that each would have a designated district-level leader responsible for teaching and learning. Smaller districts (fewer than 3,000 students) often distribute district-wide leadership for teaching and learning among site-level and district-level leaders.

Purposeful Sampling and Study Participants

For the purposes of my research study, I engaged with three Wisconsin school districts ranging in size from 3,000 to 10,000 students. I used a nomination process as my protocol for selecting the districts to include in my study. I spoke with leaders of regional organizations, including Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESAs) in southern Wisconsin that support large groups of districts in order to identify leaders considered experts in supporting K–12 schools in improving reading outcomes across the state. I also spoke with leaders from regional undergraduate and graduate schools of education that have a focus on preparing practitioners of reading instruction. The list below identifies the roles of the leaders who nominated districts for my study.

1. Director of the CESA 6 Literacy Center

2. Literacy Consultant / Title Coordinator CESA 1

3. Senior Director, Curriculum and Coaching CESA 2

4. Associate Professor of Education and Chair of the Department of Education for Carroll University

5. RtI Center, Regional Technical Assistance Coordinator–Academic

6. Southeast Wisconsin Literacy Consultant

7. Director of the Association for Wisconsin School Administrators

8. Wisconsin Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents of Teaching and Learning

These experts identified twenty-two Wisconsin schools with student enrollment ranging from 3,000 to 10,000 who are successfully increasing reading achievement at the K–2 level. I rank ordered the identified school districts based on the number of nominations received by the experts.

For the second round of the selection process to determine which three districts to include in my study, I contacted the district-level administrator of teaching and learning in the three districts identified most often by the experts and requested an interview. I spoke with a chief academic officer and two directors of teaching and learning. During the interviews, I explained the purpose of my study and asked these leaders if they could identify and share data for kindergarten through second grade that indicated that student performance in reading was increasing for all learners, the district's literacy plan, the district-wide professional development plan, and coaching protocols for literacy.

After a review of the artifacts, all three districts met the criteria to be included in the study. Each of the three district leaders was able to share universal screening and/or classroom assessment data that indicated that all students were experiencing growth in reading outcomes at the K–2 grade level. Each of the districts was able to share two of the artifacts I requested:

the district's literacy plan and a professional development plan. While all three districts employ instructional coaches, they did not share formalized coaching protocols. After a review of the data and artifacts, I met with each district-level administrator responsible for teaching and learning and sought permission to conduct my research in their district through their respective local approval processes. In each of the three districts, I was granted approval to conduct my research.

I chose to focus on the district administrators responsible for teaching and learning as the focus of my study as they are the district-level leaders responsible for undertaking leadership tasks that set the direction for all other instructional staff across the district to improve reading outcomes.

Overview of the Three Selected Districts

One of the three school districts I studied for my research is the North School District. The North School district is a rural Wisconsin 4K–12 school district. The total population of the North School District community is approximately 23,000 people, and the median household income is $64,000. The district itself consists of eight schools with a student enrollment of approximately 3,300 students. The racial makeup of the students is 86% white, 2% Black or African American, 7% Hispanic or Latino, 2% Asian, and 4% two or more races. For the purposes of my study, I identified the district leader as the director of teaching and learning, Rick. Rick began his educational career as a social studies teacher at the middle and high school level. While serving as a classroom educator, Rick had the opportunity to take on leadership roles, which ignited his interest to become an administrator. After obtaining his administrative degree, Rick served as an associate principal, a primary school principal, and a director of teaching and learning for two school districts. Rick is in his fourth year as the director of teaching and learning.

The second of the three districts I studied is the South School District. The South School District is also a rural Wisconsin 4K–12 school district. The total population of the South School

District community is approximately 30,000 people, and the median household income is $108,000. The district itself consists of nine schools with a total student enrollment of approximately 5,000 students. The racial makeup of the students is 92% white, 4% Hispanic or Latino, 1% Asian, 1% other, and 2% two or more races. For the purposes of my study, I identified two district co-leaders for reading. The first of the two co-leaders is the director of teaching and learning, Tiffany. Tiffany began her career as an English teacher, teaching at the middle and high school levels for eighteen years, which led her to a curriculum position for secondary social studies and English. She then shifted into administrative roles, including site leadership as a high school assistant principal and an elementary principal, prior to moving to a district administrative role. Tiffany is in her fifth year as the 4K–12 director of teaching and learning. The second district co-leader for reading instruction is the elementary curriculum coordinator, Sarah. Sarah was a classroom teacher for eleven years at the middle school level, teaching English language arts and social studies. During her time as a classroom teacher, Sarah completed her master's degree in reading and became a reading specialist and an instructional coach. The director of teaching and learning, Tiffany, sought and obtained permission from the school board to add the elementary curriculum coordinator position, and Sarah applied for the role. She earned the position and has been serving in the role of elementary curriculum coordinator for the past four years. While Tiffany is Sarah's supervisor, they work as co-leaders with respect to elementary reading, each taking on specific tasks at the 5K–2 level.

The third of the three districts I studied is the East School District. The East School District is a suburban Wisconsin 5K–12 school district. The total population of the East School District community is 36,000 people, and the median household income is $86,000. The district itself consists of six schools with a total student enrollment of approximately 4,250 students. The racial makeup of the students in the East School District is 89% white, 1% Black or African American, 3% Hispanic or Latino, 4% Asian, and 2% two or more races. For the purposes of my

study, I identified the district leader to be the director of teaching and learning, Ryan. Ryan

started his journey as an educator serving as a kindergarten teacher. After spending some time

in the classroom, Ryan moved into administration as the assistant principal of an elementary

school. After a year in that role, he was promoted to principal, serving in that capacity for a few

years until he was transferred to a bigger elementary school in the same district. Four years

ago, Ryan became the director of elementary teaching and learning.

Data Collection Techniques and Methods

Artifact Review

For the first stage of my data collection, I gathered and reviewed artifacts from the North,

South, and East School Districts related to the continuous improvement of reading outcomes.

Richards (2020) describes artifact review as a data-gathering method that is unobtrusive, often

overlooked by novice researchers, and potentially valuable (P. 50). Richards addresses the

importance of considering what questions the artifacts may be able to answer and the history

the artifacts may be able to provide prior to approaching in-person interviews stating: "You will

approach the interview informed, not waste your participants' time asking questions whose

answers are publicly available. And, if their interpretation is different from what you read in the

newspaper archives, this too is data" (p. 51). The artifacts I collected to review (table 1) gave me

initial insight into the leadership tasks of the three directors of teaching and learning.

Table 1

Artifacts Collected

	Curriculum Renewal and Design Plan	Sample of the 5K–2 Reading Curriculum	"Look For" Documents	Professional Learning Plan
North School District	X	X	X	X
South School District	X	X		X
East School District	X	X		X

As I gathered and reviewed the artifacts, I considered several elements to increase the likelihood that the artifacts were authentic and accurate. I considered the history of the artifact; I ensured that it was a primary source, complete and as originally constructed; and I ascertained the circumstances under which it was created and for what purpose it was produced (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

My rationale for studying each district's curriculum renewal and design plan and a sample of the literacy curriculum was twofold: (1) the curriculum renewal and design plan would give me insight into the history of the reading curriculum, who was involved in the development of the curriculum (or if it was purchased), and how frequently the curriculum is reviewed and revised, which would reveal the leadership tasks the district administrator responsible for reading instruction undertook to ensure that the K–2 staff have an articulated curriculum; and (2) the analysis of the reading curriculum document would assist me in unpacking the pedagogical approach to reading instruction along with the clearly articulated expectations for instruction by grade level to understand what is taught at each level.

I spent time analyzing the district-wide professional development plan / professional learning plan / professional development scope and sequence, as it provided insight into the types and frequency of professional development that are offered district-wide in service of improving reading instruction, including, but not limited to, onboarding for professional educators who teach reading, district-wide universal professional learning about reading instruction, site-level universal professional development for reading instruction, and targeted professional development about reading instruction for roles at the district and site level that support reading instruction (reading specialists, coaches, interventionists, teachers of students with disabilities, etc.). Understanding the types and frequency of professional development provided further insight into the tasks the district leader for reading undertakes.

The North School District provided a set of "Look For" documents for me to review. I spent time analyzing those documents in order to understand the observed adult actions the

district expected to be present in the learning environment as well as the process for conducting learning walk-throughs.

After gathering and assessing the artifacts, I used the information gleaned from the artifact review to create a profile for each of the three districts to set the context for the interviews and observations that I conducted as part of my research. After I completed my data gathering through observations and interviews, I reviewed the documents again and coded the artifacts using basic descriptive categories related to the essential conditions for reading and the leadership tasks that district-level leaders undertake, which I have identified in my paper. I remained open and analyzed for unexpected information/categories that emerged through the data using an iterative process throughout the artifact review.

Interviews

For the second stage of my data collection, I conducted interviews with K–12 practitioners in the three selected districts. I followed Creswell's (1998) approach to interviewing, which includes several steps, starting with defining the research question that will be answered by the interview. I constructed my interview questions to gather data related to my research question, which seeks to understand the leadership tasks that district-level leaders enact to lead for instructional improvement in reading achievement at the primary grade levels (appendix A).

I followed Creswell's (1988) recommendation and identified the interviewees who could best answer the questions based on purposeful sampling. In total, I conducted fourteen one-on-one interviews with educators in varying roles in each system (table 2).

Table 2

Interviewees

	North School District	South School District	East School District
Superintendent	X	X	
Chief Academic Officer			X
Director of Teaching and Learning	X	X	X
District-Wide Elementary Curriculum Coordinator		X	
District-Wide Elementary Instructional Coach	X		
District-Wide Reading Specialist/ Interventionist	X		
Elementary Principal		X	X
Site Instructional Coach		X	X (Two)

For each of the interviews, I utilized audio and video recording by conducting the interviews via Zoom. I used a separate recording device to simultaneously record the interview while I was conducting it to serve as a backup should the Zoom video/audio fail. I used an interview protocol that began with two personal background questions to establish rapport and then moved to six to eight open-ended questions related to my research question. The open-ended questions allowed me to elicit information from the district-level leaders for literacy with respect to the history and current state of the essential conditions for reading achievement and the leadership tasks they undertake to establish and maintain those conditions at the K–2 level system-wide. The artifacts I reviewed, coupled with the questions I posed during the

interview, illuminated the existence (or lack) of the presence of the essential conditions for reading achievement and the tasks the leader undertakes to ensure they exist (appendix A).

After I conducted the interviews and transcribed them, I uploaded the documents into MAXQDA and coded the transcripts using basic descriptive categories related to the leadership actions district-level leaders enacted for reading growth to occur. I remained open and analyzed for unexpected information/categories that emerged through the data using an iterative process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Observations

For the third stage of my data collection, I conducted an observation of the district-level administrator of teaching and learning. In the North School district, I observed Rick, the director of teaching and learning, as he co-led a professional development session / planning session with a CESA director. The observation was for a two-hour period and had multiple participants, including the district-wide elementary curriculum instructional coach, the district-wide reading specialist/interventionist, the district-wide multilingual coordinator, and the district-wide program support staff member for students with special needs. At the halfway point in the meeting, seven additional staff members joined. Six of the staff members were literacy support teachers and one was an associate principal at the elementary level.

In the South School district, I observed the elementary curriculum coordinator, Sarah, as she led the weekly instructional coaches meeting. The meeting was ninety minutes in duration with six staff members total, which included Sarah and five elementary instructional coaches.

In the East School District, I observed the director of elementary teaching and learning, Ryan, as he led the monthly elementary literacy meeting over a three-hour period. The first hour was inclusive of the learning leaders for literacy, which included seven literacy specialists, the director of student services, two special education coaches, and the English language learner instructional coach for a total of twelve staff. Approximately two-thirds of the group left after the first hour, and Ryan remained along with the literacy specialists for an additional two hours.

These three meetings provided me an opportunity to gather a firsthand account of the district leader's leadership tasks in the setting where it took place. Combining observations along with the data obtained from artifact review and interviews allowed for a holistic interpretation of the leadership tasks and a triangulation of the data related to how the leader improves reading outcomes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I participated in the meetings as an observer, holding a peripheral membership role. I interacted closely enough with members to establish an insider's identity without participating in the activity in a manner that impacted the core group membership. I conducted my observations by infusing myself into the activities that are typical routines for the district-level administrator of teaching and learning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

I gathered my data during the observations using handwritten field notes and created an audio recording of the dialogue. In an effort to gather accurate data, I followed the guidelines identified by Merriam & Tisdell (2015), which include the following:

1. Pay attention

2. Shift from a "wide angle" to a "narrow" angle lens—that is, focusing on a specific person, interaction or activity while mentally blocking out all others

3. Look for keywords in people's remarks that will stand out later

4. Concentrate on the first and last remarks of each conversation

5. Mentally play back remarks and scenes during breaks in the talking or observing (p. 129)

I captured my field notes in an observation protocol (appendix B) in three categories: descriptions of the observation environment (setting, people, activities, etc.), direct quotations, and my reflections and comments as an observer. I made an audio recording of the meetings to ensure that I captured direct quotes accurately (Richards, 2020).

After conducting the observations, I checked my field notes against the audio recordings. I coded the transcriptsin MAXQDA, using basic descriptive categories related to the leadership

actions district-level leaders enact to increase reading achievement, which I have identified in my paper. I remained open and analyzed for unexpected information/categories that emerged through the data using an iterative process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Data Analysis Techniques

After I completed my three rounds of data collection through artifact review, interviews, and observations, I analyzed the data for my comparative study to further understand the leadership tasks a district leader undertakes in order to ensure that reading achievement occurs at the 5K–2 grade level.

I started my analysis by examining the presence of the leadership tasks to improve literacy in each of the three districts I am studying, including taking a systemic approach to literacy reform, establishing and maintaining a data-driven culture around literacy, providing continuous professional learning for staff anchored in the district approach to literacy, and prioritizing the allocation of adequate resources for reading instruction. I also examined the data for the presence of leadership tasks that were evident in at least two of the the three districts I studied that were not present in my literature review. After examining the leadership data for each of the three districts separately, I examined the data I gathered as a comparative analysis of all three districts and sought patterns and unique differences in the categories of leadership actions for reading that occurred (Richards, 2020). Then I analyzed the leadership actions through Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four-Frames model. I was first introduced to the Four-Frames model in the early 2000s in Dr. Kent Peterson's class, and I have found it to be an integral tool throughout my tenure as an administrator when working through both technical and adaptive challenges. I selected Bolman and Deal's Four-Frames model as the framework for analyzing my data, as its holistic view of organizational dynamics is well-suited for analyzing how district leaders create the capacity for improved literacy instruction at the site level. By examining structural, human resource, political, and symbolic factors, I gained a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay of elements that influence a district's ability to improve

reading instruction at the primary grade level. The Four-Frame multifaceted approach allows for a more thorough and nuanced analysis of the challenges and opportunities district leaders face in their efforts to improve reading outcomes in grades 5K–2.

Bolman and Deal's Four-Frames model provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing how district leaders create the capacity for improved literacy instruction in schools. The structural frame examines the district's organizational structure, resource allocation, policies, and communication channels. The human resource frame focuses on the recruitment, development, and support of skilled literacy educators. The political frame explores the dynamics of power, conflict, and negotiation among stakeholders in shaping literacy policies and practices. The symbolic frame illuminates the district's vision, values, and culture surrounding literacy instruction.

By applying this model to my data analysis, I was able to gain an in-depth understanding of the complex factors influencing a district leader's leadership tasks in service of growing reading outcomes in the primary grades. The Four-Frame model provided a framework through which I synthesized findings across multiple data sources, identified patterns and themes, and generated insights and recommendations for district leaders striving to improve reading outcomes in the early grades. Figure 3 provides an overview of the Four-Frames model. This information is captured in chapter 4 of my research study.

Figure 3

Overview of the Four-Frames Model, Bolman and Deal (2017, p. 20)

	Frame			
	Structural	Human Resource	Political	Symbolic
Metaphor for Organization	Factory or machine	Family	Jungle	Carnival, temple, theater
Supporting Disciplines	Sociology, management, science	Psychology	Political science	Anthropology. dramaturgy, institutional theory
Central Concepts	Roles, goals, strategies, policies, technology, environment	Needs, skills, relationships	Power, conflict, competition, politics	Culture, myth, meaning, metaphor, ritual, ceremony, stories, heroes
Image of Leadership	Social architecture	Empowerment	Advocacy and political savvy	Inspiration
Basic Leadership Challenge	Attune structure to task, technology, environment	Align organizational and human needs	Develop agenda and power base	Create faith, belief, beauty, meaning

For the next step in my analysis, I examined the data for the presence of the essential reading conditions in each of the three districts studied, including a focus on reading volume with protected instructional time for students to read extensively; student access to texts that are interesting, culturally relevant, and at their instructional level; the promulgation of a love for literacy; student choice and voice in what they read; opportunities to practice listening comprehension; and effective teaching that includes a balance of reading experiences and feedback to the reader on a continuous basis. I also remained open to the data and identified essential reading conditions that existed in at least two of the three sites that were not present in my literature review. After examining the data for each of the three districts separately, I examined the data I gathered as a comparative analysis of all three districts and sought patterns

and unique differences in the categories of essential conditions for reading that occurred

(Richards, 2020). This information is captured in chapter 5 of my research study.

In chapter 6 of my research study, I discuss my findings and conclusions and provide

guidance for district-level leaders seeking to improve reading outcomes at the primary level.

Trustworthiness and Validity

It was of the utmost importance as a qualitative researcher that I committed to a high

ethical standard and analyzed the totality of the data I gathered as opposed to selecting among

the data available to confirm what I wished to be validated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Richards

(2020) identifies two common ways of checking validity: triangulation and member checking.

Merriam & Tisdell (2015) extend beyond the two ways to ensure validity to include six additional

categories: adequate engagement in data collection; researcher's position or reflexivity; peer

review/examination; audit trail; rich, thick descriptions; and maximum variation (p. 229). For my

research, I focused on five strategies to ensure trustworthiness and validity of my findings:

triangulation, member checks, researcher's position or reflexivity, peer review/examination, and

rich, thick descriptions.

Triangulation — Richards (2020) defines *triangulation* as the term widely used for

research designs where different sorts of data or methods of handling data are brought to bear

on the research question. I gathered data on the tasks district leaders undertake to increase

reading outcomes through artifact review, interviews, and observations. The data was collected

in a variety of ways, which allowed me to triangulate the data for valid themes to emerge.

Member checking — I conducted member checking at the end of the research by

producing the report to be reviewed by the district leaders I studied to ensure that their view of

the data aligned with my interpretation (Richards, 2020).

Researcher's position or reflexivity — Merriam and Tisdell (2015) refer to this strategy

as the "critical self-reflection by the researcher regarding assumptions, worldview, biases,

theoretical orientations, and relationship to the study that may affect the investigation" (p. 229).

As a seasoned K–12 public school educator and literacy consultant, I practiced frequent reflection and checked my biases to ensure that I did not transfer my lived experience as an educator onto the interpretation of the data I gathered about the leadership tasks the district-level leaders undertook in the districts I studied.

Peer review/examination — This strategy involves the engagement of colleagues in a discussion about the process of the study, the congruency of the themes the researcher is finding with the gathered data, and tentative interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Throughout my data gathering and interpretation, I engaged in dialogue with a peer to review the raw data, my interpretations of the data, and the themes that were emerging from the data.

Rich, thick descriptions — According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), rich, thick descriptions "provide enough description to contextualize the study such that readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situations match the research context, and hence whether findings can be transferred" (p. 229). I included rich, thick descriptions of the artifacts I reviewed and the context of the school district that I visually observed while conducting the observations of the district leader of teaching and learning. These descriptions helped illuminate the essential conditions for reading and the leadership tasks being taken to promote reading achievement. In addition, the descriptions addressed additional themes that emerged from my research by using descriptive details and direct quotes from the interviews and focus groups I conducted as I researched.

It was by employing these five strategies that I ensured my qualitative research findings are trustworthy and valid.

Ethical Considerations

My research was conducted on the leadership tasks of district-level administrators of teaching and learning in three school districts who are working on a daily basis to navigate particularly troubled waters given the complex and political nature of K–12 public education at

this time. According to Richards (2020): "Qualitative researchers are far more likely to impact and impede people's lives than are researchers whose data are collected impersonally and recorded numerically. Their questions are more intimate, and their methods more intrusive" (p. 15). Keeping the gravity of that statement in mind, I did everything within my sphere of influence to carefully consider and respect the ethical considerations of the research I conducted and the potential impact to harm others if I did not enter the space with caution and humility. I endeavored to add to the body of research related to increasing reading achievement at the K–2 level without causing any unnecessary harm to the leaders and districts I studied and/or damaging my own reputation as a K–12 educator for thirty-one years. No participant or district was identified by their given name and geographical location. Instead I used pseudonyms to protect the identities of all involved. I worked collaboratively with my advisor and heeded his advice and direction when it came to ethical considerations, and I sought guidance and approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

I kept confidentiality and privacy in the forefront of my mind as I interacted with study participants. I ensured that private spaces were available to conduct my one-to-one in-person interviews, and I conducted virtual interviews in a closed, private space so the participants were assured their identity and comments were not known to anyone but me as the interviewer. I obtained informed consent from all people involved, and I informed all participants that I recorded the interviews (audio and video) and meetings (audio). After I transcribed the interviews, I deleted the audio and video recordings.

Merriam & Tisdell (2015) identify a particular concern that one must be aware of when conducting qualitative research: "An unethical case writer could so select from among available data that virtually anything he wished could be illustrated" (p. 52). I was vigilant in keeping my biases in mind as I interpreted the data and focused on analyzing all of the data for what it was as opposed to what I thought it should be.

Limitations

This study has potential limitations. The first limitation pertains to the participant sample. The districts I studied are limited to districts within a size range of 3,500 to 10,000 students. The findings from my study may not transfer to smaller or larger districts given the impact that student enrollment has on resources available to districts.

A second limitation to my study is the limitation of my research to Wisconsin school districts alone. The findings from my research may not apply to other districts outside of Wisconsin given that K–12 education is state regulated, each state identifying its own instructional standards, expectations, and instructional materials. Wisconsin has a long history of local control of schools by local school boards. This has resulted in a large number of small school districts focused on specific locales. My conclusions may not be applicable to larger school systems. Wisconsin is also unique in that it is a state without collective bargaining rights. In states with collective bargaining rights, a district leader may or may not have the same ability to enact leadership tasks due to negotiations for some aspects of the research like time and professional development.

A third limitation to consider with my study is the post-pandemic timing of my research. The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed teaching and learning in K–12 public schools for at least two years, and the toll the pandemic took on staff and students academically, socially, and emotionally was immense. Most public schools saw a drop in their reading achievement at the 5K–12 level from 2020 to 2022. The number of districts who are realizing growth in reading achievement at the 5K–2 level may be fewer than pre-2020. In addition to the impact on student results, many district leaders could not focus on and maintain leadership tasks for reading growth, as their time and resources were drawn to pandemic management and the pivots in our instructional models required by public health mandates.

Another limitation to consider is my experience (or lack thereof) as a qualitative researcher. While I worked closely with my advisor and took great care not to make any

intentional mistakes, I am aware that as a novice researcher I may have committed some errors in the process of conducting my qualitative research study.

Despite the possible limitations of this research study, it is valuable because it addresses the gaps in the field of research with respect to the leadership tasks a district-level leader undertakes to ensure reading achievement occurs at the primary grade levels. The results of my study are captured in the form of a leadership for literacy guidance document to serve as a resource for district-level leaders striving to improve their reading outcomes for all learners.

CHAPTER 4: Findings from the North, South, and East School Districts

Leadership Tasks

As an experienced K–12 practitioner, I engaged in my research as a way to grow my capacity to improve reading outcomes in my role as an assistant superintendent of teaching, learning, and equity as well as to provide guidance for other district leaders in the field of public education as we grapple with the inability to ensure that all children can read on grade level by the end of second grade. Throughout the duration of my research, two questions guided my work as I endeavored to accomplish my goal: (1) What are the essential conditions for literacy achievement at the primary level? and (2) What are the leadership tasks district-level leaders enact to lead for instructional improvement in reading achievement at the primary grade levels?

In this chapter, I focus on the findings that address my second question related to the leadership tasks I uncovered in the North, South, and East School Districts through my artifact review, interviews, and observations. Impactful school district leaders are essential for ensuring that students have access to strong early literacy instruction. They shape a vision of academic success in literacy for all students; create a positive district climate in which students feel supported as readers; cultivate leadership in others so that teachers and other adults feel empowered to realize their schools' reading outcome goals; guide district-wide instructional decisions that improve reading instruction; and manage people, data, and processes to foster improvement in reading outcomes through the leadership tasks and actions they undertake. Ultimately, district leaders have a significant impact on students' experiences and reading achievement by allocating their time and focus on strategic evidence-based tasks and actions to lead others across the system to improve outcomes in student data. I examined my data to determine the presence (or lack) of the leadership actions/tasks as outlined in my literature review. I remained open in my analysis and identified additional leadership actions that had not arisen from the literature review but were present in at least two of the three districts I studied.

Bolman and Deal's Four-Frames model (2017) was used to organize leadership tasks identified in the structural, human resources, political, and symbolic frames.

Structural Leadership Tasks

My analysis of the leadership tasks in the North, South, and East School Districts begins with the structural frame. According to Bolman and Deal (2017), "The central beliefs of the structural frame reflect confidence in rationality and faith that a suitable array of roles and responsibilities will minimize distracting personal static and maximize people's performance on the job" (p. 47). They identify some key assumptions to the structural frame including: an organization's purpose is to meet objectives and goals; organizations increase efficiency when the division of labor is clear and matched to the appropriate specialist; organizations need coordination and control to ensure that every member of the organization is working together; organizations thrive when there is a common mission/goal as opposed to individual agendas; and organizations operate best when their structures are aligned to meet their desired goal.

While conducting my literature review on leadership tasks, the concept of instructional leaders enacting a system-wide approach to reform was prevalent in the research. While the research was not specific to literacy, I could easily ascertain how a systemic approach to reform could apply to district-level leaders striving to increase reading outcomes at the primary level. In my investigation of the North, South, and East School Districts, clear and plentiful evidence existed to support the structural leadership tasks for leading system-wide improvement in reading outcomes. This included a focus on the following seven leadership actions: (1) establishing district-level structures for coherence, including meeting structures, decision-making protocols, communication structures and clearly identified timelines for adoption and rollout of materials; (2) establishing and adhering to continuous improvement processes for reading through curriculum renewal and design plans; (3) establishing and clearly articulating reading content/standards to be taught by grade level; (4) clearly articulating the district expectations for the delivery of reading instruction; (5) creating structures and protocols

for data-based decision-making teams; (6) creating and conducting reading fidelity/integrity walks; and (7) allocating and communicating expectations for minutes of instruction for reading in 5K–2 classrooms.

1. *Establishing District-Level Structures for Coherence*

In the East School District, the chief academic officer described the system-wide leadership actions she enacted to establish structures to create coherence from the district to the site level as a key strategy in supporting a system-wide implementation of a 5K–2 literacy curriculum aligned to evidence-based reading research. She discussed the establishment of meeting structures, decision-making protocols, communication structures, professional development plans, and a district-wide timeline for the adoption and implementation of new reading instructional materials. Establishing and communicating clear district-wide structures emerged as the first important leadership task because 5K–12 school districts tend to be loosely coupled systems with multiple sites and multiple leaders at each site responsible for supporting staff in improving reading outcomes. A lack of clear direction and established structure from the district leaders may allow for sites to drift from the district approach to reading instruction, resulting in a failure to deliver a guaranteed and viable curriculum to all students. Additionally, 5K–12 public school districts tend to have many tasks competing for their time with limited staff to ensure that consistency in reading instruction aligned to best practice is in place in every 5K–2 classroom. This makes it paramount that district-level leaders create clear, consistent, and predictable structures for all staff to follow. When speaking to the importance of clear structures to support the adoption and implementation of the new reading curriculum, the chief academic officer at the East School District said:

> Everything had to be clear and concise, as well as ensuring that as action steps were being rolled out, it was with a system in mind. Decisions weren't made in a snap. They were thoughtful because they needed to be systematic. We have four elementary buildings, and prior to this implementation, the four elementary buildings were doing very

different things in regards to curriculum. Decisions were made systematically, so that this was an opportunity for us to be united across four buildings. So that thoughtfulness and purposeful action planning was key as well.

Establishing structures and clear direction played an important role in the improved reading outcomes at the 5K–2 level in the East School District.

When speaking about the implementation of new 5K–2 instructional materials for reading, an East School District instructional coach reiterated the importance of clear district-wide structures, stating: "Our implementation for this has been so strategic, system-wide, and so well planned. I strongly believe that's why it's been as successful as it's been." Similar comments and evidence of system-wide structures with clear alignment from the district office to the classroom were present in the North and South School Districts as well.

2. *Establishing and Adhering to Continuous Improvement Processes for Reading*

The second leadership action that emerged as pivotal from the data gathered at each of the three school districts using a structural frame was the establishment and adherence to a continuous improvement process for teaching and learning through a curriculum renewal and design plan. This emerged as a pivotal leadership task because the curriculum renewal and design plans were designed to engage staff in a study of recent and relevant research; a reflection on their current practices, student outcomes, and instructional materials; and opportunities to improve the teaching and learning for each content area every six to eight years. While the plans were not limited to the content area of reading, in each of the three curriculum renewal and design plans, designated years existed in the cycle for specific subject areas and action steps to continuously improve. Figure 4 provides a high-level overview of the North School District's curriculum renewal and design plan processes and the designation of content areas to be studied each year. Each of the three school districts have established and followed a curriculum renewal and design plan with a span of six to eight years, similar to the plan depicted in figure 4.

Curriculum renewal and design plans play an important role in K–12 school districts, as they provide a roadmap for the continuous improvement of curriculum and instruction. They are typically revised every five to six years by directors of teaching and learning in conjunction with administrators and educators at the site and district level. The action steps of the plan clearly outline the processes to be used as content-level curriculum committees collaborate to improve teaching and learning to grow student outcomes. In addition to providing guidance and predictability for teaching and learning staff, it provides a clear timeline for operational staff to ensure that the district budget allocation for instructional materials is aligned with the needed materials that arise through the curriculum renewal and design plan process.

Rick from the North School District described how their curriculum renewal and design processes were structured with respect to time and actions to be completed each year:

> The six-year curriculum cycle . . . so content areas are broken out by that. Year one is written as kind of an early investigation year. And then there's a review year, an implementation year, kind of refine, refine, refine, and then it comes back. Then the review year is where we pull a team together. We do micro pilots, so it's kind of a one-year review, and then a supported implementation.

During my artifact review of the three districts' curriculum renewal and design plan processes, I was able to confirm the presence of the stages of curriculum renewal and design, the staff involved in the processes, and the action steps the design team members would take to engage in the continuous improvement of teaching and learning for reading.

Figure 4

North School District's Curriculum Renewal and Design Plan Overview

YEAR	Year 1 Review Launch Data Review Needs Analysis Collaborative Team continues refinement	Year 2 Revision Resource Pilots Course Revision Essential Standards Revisit Curriculum Revisions	Year 3 Implementation Resource Purchases Professional Learning/Support Implementation of Revised Curriculum	Year 4 Implementation 2 Revisions Continued coaching, learning, support.	Year 5 Implementation 3 Collaborative Team continues refinement	Year 6 Implementation 4 Collaborative Team continues refinement
2022-2023	Music, Art PE/Health	Science, Human Growth & Development	Social Studies, Counseling, RtI	ELA		
2023-2024	Math	Music, Art PE/Health	Science, Human Growth & Development	Social Studies, Counseling, RtI	ELA	
2024-2025	CTE, World Language, Digital Literacy	Math	Music, Art PE/Health	Science, Human Growth & Development	Social Studies, Counseling, RtI	ELA
2025-2026	ELA	CTE, World Language, Digital Literacy	Math	Music, Art PE/Health	Science, Human Growth & Development	Social Studies, Counseling, RtI
2026-2027	Social Studies, Counseling, RtI	ELA	CTE, World Language, Digital Literacy	Math	Music, Art PE/Health	Science, Human Growth & Development
2027-2028	Science, Human Growth & Development	Social Studies, Counseling, RtI	ELA	CTE, World Language, Digital Literacy	Math	Music, Art PE/Health
2028-2029	Music, Art PE/Health	Science, Human Growth & Development	Social Studies, Counseling, RtI	ELA	CTE, World Language, Digital Literacy	Math
2029-2030	Math	Music, Art PE/Health	Science, Human Growth & Development	Social Studies, Counseling, RtI	ELA	CTE, World Language, Digital Literacy
2030-2031	CTE, World Language, Digital Literacy	Math	Music, Art PE/Health	Science, Human Growth & Development	Social Studies, Counseling, RtI	ELA

3. Establishing and Articulating Essential/Focus Reading Standards

The third structural leadership task that arose in support of a system-wide approach to improving reading outcomes was to clearly establish and articulate the essential/focus standards educators are to teach in reading in grades 5K–2 to ensure that all staff share the same understanding of the required content for students across all elementary schools and up through the grade levels. This arose as a critical leadership task, as public schools are inundated with standards. To fully teach all of the Wisconsin standards across all content areas to mastery is unlikely given the number of standards that exist and the amount of time students spend in school. With so many standards to choose from and without clear direction from the district as to the most important standards by grade level, educators in the same system may select different standards on which to focus, inadvertently creating gaps in learning as students progress through the grade levels. The clear identification of the content each student needs to master in reading by grade level provides a solid path to build and expand upon foundational

skills for reading year after year for stronger reading outcomes regardless of the site within the district or the teacher.

All three districts had established and clearly defined the content to be taught in grades 5K–2 across the system in reading. In the South and North School Districts, Tiffany and Rick had gathered groups of educators from across the system to unpack reading standards and to create pacing guides/curriculum to support all 5K–2 staff in understanding the essential grade-level skills to be mastered by all students. The process of unpacking reading standards requires a breaking down and a clear understanding of the specific learning expectations outlined in the reading standards. Unpacking reading standards typically includes breaking down the reading standards into smaller learning objectives; clarifying the expectations of the standard by identifying the key reading knowledge, skills, and abilities that students are expected to develop; selecting and ensuring that evidence-based reading instructional strategies, materials, and assessments are aligned to the unpacked standard to effectively support student growth in reading; and developing instructional activities and assessments that address the unpacked standard to support student attainment of the reading content by the primary-grade students (Ainsworth, 2022). This is a structural support to ensure consistent access to content at each grade level across the system, focusing on high leverage and enduring standards in reading. Figure 5 is a sample of a second-grade curriculum document for the South School District. It captures the structural support of clearly defined expectations for all staff on the reading content students should learn in second grade. Sarah from the South School District stated:

> We've done a lot of standards unpacking work, looking at standards, finding focus standards, making sure that we have conversations about what these standards are actually asking kids to know and to be able to do so that as teachers we understand what those expectations are. Then we decided to have vertical team meetings with our kindergarten, first- , and second-grade teachers. We looked at our standards, and we

looked at the expectations of the resource, and we synthesized all the pieces to create a scope and sequence for our 5K–2 reading.

The established and articulated content/standards that educators are expected to teach played a pivotal role in the increased outcomes in reading at grades 5K–2 by ensuring that staff across the system have a common understanding of what students need to know and be able to do as readers.

Figure 5

Sample of South Scope and Sequence for Second-Grade Reading

Strand: Reading Foundational Skills		
	Standard	**I Can Statements/Learning Targets**
Phonological Awareness	**RF.2.2 Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).**	
	a. Add, delete, and substitute individual sounds (phonemes) in simple one-syllable words to make new words, including initial, final, medial, consonant blends, short vowel sounds, and long vowel sounds.	I can add a sound in a one-syllable word to make a new word. I can take away a sound in a one-syllable word to make a new word. I can substitute a sound in a one-syllable word to make a new word. I can add, take away, and substitute sounds in the beginning, middle, and ends of words. I can add, take away, and substitute consonant blends, short vowel sounds, and long vowel sounds to one-syllable words to make new words.

	Standard	**I Can Statements/Learning Targets**
Phonics and Word Recognition	**RF.2.3 Know and apply grade-level phonics and word-analysis skills in decoding words.**	
	a. Distinguish long and short vowels when reading regularly spelled one-syllable words.	I can tell if a vowel is long or short when I'm reading one-syllable words.
	b. Know spelling-sound correspondences for additional common vowel teams.	I know common spellings using vowel teams.

	c. Decode and encode regularly spelled one- , two- , and some three-syllable CVC pattern words (e.g., one-syllable: mat, two-syllable: picnic, three-syllable: fantastic, etc.).	I can read regularly spelled CVC words that are one, two, or three syllables long. I can regularly spell CVC words that are one, two, or three syllables long.
	d. Decode words with common prefixes and suffixes.	I can read words that have common prefixes. I can read words that have common suffixes.
	e. Decode regularly spelled two-syllable words with long vowels. Encode some of these words. Know when to drop the final *e* when adding *-ing* or *-ed* endings. (Silent-e vowel pattern base word). Know when to double the final consonant when adding the suffix *-ing* or *-ed.*	I can read two-syllable words with long vowels. I can spell words by following spelling rules. I know when to drop the final *e* of words when adding *-ing* or *-ed.* I know when to double the final consonant when adding the suffix *-ing* or *-ed.*
	f. Recognize and read grade-appropriate irregularly spelled words.	I can read grade-level spelling words that break the rules.
	Related to language standards: See L.2.6 for additional spelling/encoding/word-analysis guidance.	

The approach to providing clarity in the content students should learn in reading at the primary grades in the North School District was similar to the approach of the South School District by providing structural support for all 5K–2 teachers through essential standards that are captured in a curriculum guide. According to Rick:

District-wide essential standards are determined by the criteria of endurance, leverage, and readiness. We take an additional step besides identifying essential standards as a part of our progression. We break each of those down, and we have that done in literacy, reading and writing, as well as math. We have those broken down into what we call ladder progressions or progressions of learning. They take the standard and they break it down from the least complex skill. And then on top of that, what would the student

need to be able to do next and next and next and next. And the top of that ladder is the

standard itself, bringing it all together.

These standards and the related ladders are captured in a curriculum portal and aligned to the

adopted instructional materials as a structural support to ensure clarity and consistency across

the system with respect to the reading content students are to learn at the 5K–2 levels.

An example of the published guides for the structural support for first-grade teachers in

the North School District is captured in figure 6. This artifact plays an important role in ensuring

a guaranteed and viable curriculum across multiple sites and grade levels, as it provides clarity

and serves as a roadmap for educators as to which standards are essential for their grade

level/unit. It is necessary to identify essential/focus standards, as too many are identified in the

Wisconsin English language arts (ELA) standards to feasibly teach all to mastery in a school

year. To reasonably include all of the required ELA standards, essential/focus standards are

identified by educator committees and reviewed every six to seven years to ensure the

appropriate standards are the area of focus. Classroom educators across the district teach the

essential/focus standards to mastery and expose students to the remaining standards that were

not deemed as essential by the district educators who create the curriculum. Common

assessments ensure that all educators are assessing student progress in the same manner and

with similar expectations for performance. Pacing guides serve as an indicator of the

approximate length of time for which the lesson/unit should be taught to ensure that students

have similar exposure to the curriculum across grade levels and sites.

Figure 6

Sample of North School District's First-Grade Curriculum

Units of Study (Sequenced)	Essential Standards Associated	Key Learning Targets	Essential Question(s)	Common Assessment	Pacing
Orientation to School & Literacy					3 days
Module 1 Nice to Meet You!	1.L.4b 1.L.4c 1.RI.7 1.RL.2 1.RL.3 1.RL.5 1.W.2 1.W.3	Key Learning Targets: ● Foundational Skills: -I can say the beginning, middle and end sounds of one-syllable words. (1.RF.2.c) ● Reading Workshop & Vocabulary: - I can explain major differences between books that tell stories and books that give information. - I can use text features to identify a fiction or nonfiction book. (1.RL.5) - I can determine the meaning of unknown and multiple meaning words/phrases by using a strategy of choice (context clues, affixes, root words). - I can use a strategy to solve unknown words/phrases. - I can use a strategy to solve multiple-meaning words/phrases. (1.L.4) ● Writing Workshop: - I can end my story. - I can use temporal words to show my story has an order. - I can include details that support my writing topic.	How can making new friends and learning new things help us?	<u>Formative Assessments</u> -Selection Quizzes -Weekly Assessments -Module Assessments <u>Performance - Based Assessments</u> -Narrative Writing -Inquiry and Research Project ("Celebrate Us!" Profiles)	3 weeks

		- I can write a story with a clear structure. - I can write a story with a setting and characters. (1.W.3)			

The East School District leadership took a different approach to creating clarity about the reading content to be taught system-wide in grades 5K–2 than the North and South School Districts. The East School District leaders did not engage staff in unpacking and identifying standards, citing a desire to remove the cognitive load from the teacher and relying on the adopted instructional material and its scope and sequence to articulate the content students should be taught in reading in grades 5K–2. Evidence of curriculum documents that serve as a structural support to ensure that all staff know the reading content to teach by grade level existed in my artifact review for all three districts.

4. Articulating District Expectations for Delivery of Reading Instruction

Beyond establishing structures to ensure consistency in what students should learn in grades 5K–2, the fourth leadership task that emerged from the data was establishing and clearly articulating the district's expectations for the delivery of reading instruction. This emerged as an important leadership strategy because not all reading instructional practices yield strong outcomes for students. For example, prior to the emergence of the science of reading research, 5K–2 educators routinely engaged in reading instruction using the three-cueing system for guided reading with a focus on meaning, structure, and visual (M-S-V) cues to teach a child to read. Children taught with the M-S-V approach to reading are prompted to read using patterned books and encouraged to look at the first letter of a word they don't know and then use picture cues to decode the word as well as to read the sentence again to determine if the unknown word makes sense in the sentence. After completing those steps, the student is prompted to review the unknown word visually to determine if the letters they see make sense given the word they read.

It is important to note that at the time of this research the 2023 Wisconsin Act 20 was recently passed, influencing the work of the school districts studied as the legislation requires districts to begin shifting away from what is known as balanced literacy, to a science of reading approach. Students must now be taught to read with an emphasis on phonics, which is a shift for approximately 70% of Wisconsin school districts in 2024. In part, Wisconsin Act 20 prohibits the use of the three-cueing system to teach reading in the state and calls for schools to provide evidence-based reading instruction in both universal and intervention settings during which students engage in reading instruction using decodable books with a focus on foundational skills, including phonics and phonemic instruction. In the North and South School Districts, leaders have adopted reading instructional materials that incorporate evidence-based instructional strategies for reading and have implemented high-leverage reading routines to support their use of the instructional materials. High-leverage reading routines are research-based instructional strategies to improve reading outcomes (reciprocal teaching, sound symbol mapping, blending lines, oral segmenting routine, etc.). When an instructional coach in the South School District was speaking about the expectations related to the use of their adopted instructional resource and supplemental materials, she said:

> Our students are getting the same resource or the same instruction in 5K–2 across all the classrooms. So if I was a kindergarten student, it didn't matter which teacher I had, I would be hearing the same instruction. But not so tightly tied that a teacher can't say, I'm pulling this part out. I'm going to insert this high-leverage routine based on what a student needs.

When a second instructional coach from the South School District was describing the use of the adopted instructional materials and a teacher's ability to supplement with additional materials to differentiate for their learners, she said:

> [Teachers] insert things that they feel are more impactful. My kindergarten team has worked really hard at looking at the standards, at what their kids need. I'm

not saying they don't do what the resource tells them, and they don't supplement too much to overwhelm them, but they can go beyond the core instructional materials as needed.

It is clear that establishing and clearly articulating how staff should deliver reading instruction is a key leadership strategy to improve reading outcomes at the primary grades by ensuring that staff use reading instructional practices that yield strong outcomes for students.

The East School District approach differs from the North and South School Districts with respect to how 5K–2 teachers should deliver reading instruction. The approach in the East School District with respect to how reading is taught is a strict adherence to the instructional resource that incorporates research-based reading instructional strategies, with some staff referring to their approach as "militant." One of the instructional coaches from the East School District stated:

We're very specific with that because with our programming we need to ensure that all we know that the standards are taught within the instructional resource using evidence-based practice. And so with our pacing and our scope and sequence, if educators are following that to a T, all of the standards will be taught within that grade level's curriculum for that specific year using evidence-based teaching strategies. The idea is we don't expect teachers to deliver their instruction in the same way. That's where your teacher craft comes. But we do expect that a first-grade team is all teaching the same lesson on the same day and you should be within probably 10 to 15 minutes of each other. So when you walk in four classrooms every 15 minutes, it's really cool to see the evolution of that lesson.

When I inquired about the strict adherence to the instructional materials as a strategy to increase reading outcomes in the East School District, the staff I interviewed spoke to the trust they have in the research and curriculum developers that create the published instructional materials, given that educators do not have dedicated and protected time during the school day

to develop instructional materials like the curriculum developers employed by instructional materials vendors. Ryan said:

> We came to a realization . . . and the science of reading will tell you this all over the place. Our teachers had no clue, no clue how to teach reading. We know that. So our primary strategy was to find a good evidence-based program or research-based program. We spent a lot of time picking the right curriculum and training our teachers in the use of the materials, having them almost militantly follow the materials. If you think you know better than the staff developer who wrote this, let's have a conversation about that. Because you're going to put a whole bunch of people that don't know how to teach reading in a room, give them some standards and say, okay, teach this or talk about how to teach this. It just didn't add up to us. We've done too long to teachers where we say, you guys have to be everything and know everything. And unfortunately, that's burning teachers out and it's putting them in a position that's not fair to anyone.

While the approach in the East School District differs from the North and South School Districts, their rising outcomes in reading at primary grades would support this as a leadership strategy.

District leaders identifying instructional strategies for reading (in the instructional materials and/or through high-leverage reading routines) and clear expectations about the use of the adopted instructional materials existed in the artifacts I examined for all three districts.

5. *Establishing and Growing Data-Based Decision-Making Teams Focused on Reading*

The fifth district-level leadership task that emerged from the data related to structure was the establishment and implementation of structures and protocols for data-based decision-making teams and supporting their continued growth. The directors of teaching and learning in the North, South, and East School Districts each identified the establishment of Professional Learning Communities or Professional Learning Teams (PLCs/PLTs) with a similar rationale as to why they were important in their work to improve reading outcomes. They

identified PLCs/PLTs as opportunities for educators to study student data, to share best

practices, and to brainstorm reading strategies to use with students to improve reading

outcomes. While each of the districts use PLCs/PLTs to improve student outcomes in additional

content areas beyond reading, the leaders each indicated that the majority of the time the

educators spend in PLCs/PLTs in their districts is focused on reading data at the 5K–2 level.

Each of the school districts follow the Rick Dufour (2013) model, focusing on four essential

questions and planning instructional strategies to support student growth in reading. In each of

the districts I studied, the four essential questions guided inquiries that 5K–2 educator teams

used to drive collaborative inquiry and improve student learning outcomes in reading. These

questions were pivotal for fostering a culture of collaboration, reflection, and continuous

improvement among the 5K–2 teams. Below are the four PLC/PLT questions and their

significance to improving student learning outcomes in reading in the primary grades:

1. What do we want students to learn?

- This question caused the educators in the three districts I studied to focus on

  identifying specific learning goals, focus standards, or essential outcomes in

  reading at the 5K–2 level. By clarifying essential/focus standards in reading, the

  5K–2 educators aligned their instructional practices and interventions for reading

  to ensure that all students receive high-quality, targeted instruction.

2. How will we know if they have learned it?

- This question caused the educators in the three districts I studied to focus on

  assessing student learning and progress in reading. The primary-grade

  educators in the three districts used reading formative and summative

  assessment to gauge student understanding and mastery of the essential

  standards or lack thereof. By collecting and analyzing data on student reading

  performance, the educators made informed decisions about instructional

adjustments, interventions, and differentiated support in reading instruction to meet all student needs and to increase reading outcomes.

3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?

- This question prompted grade-level teams of the 5K–2 educators in the three districts I studied to provide targeted support and interventions in reading for students who struggled to achieve the desired learning outcomes. The grade-level teams of educators collaborated to identify effective intervention strategies, instructional approaches, and additional supports tailored to meet the specific needs of individual students in reading.

4. How will we extend and enrich the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency in the identified essential reading standards?

- This question propelled the 5K–2 educators in the three districts I studied to plan challenging and extended learning experiences in reading for those who have already demonstrated the essential reading content and skills. The 5K–2 grade-level teams identified enrichment opportunities and extension activities to engage and motivate advanced learners to continuously grow as readers.

By engaging in ongoing dialogue and action around these essential questions related to reading, the 5K–2 educators enhanced their professional practice, improved student learning outcomes, and cultivated a supportive and inclusive learning environment (Dufour, 2013, pp. 19–26).

The district-level leaders for all three districts have structured weekly PLC/PLT time during which staff engage in a structured protocol for data analysis. Rick from the North School District shared, "What buildings do is the PLC-at-Work model, we embrace it. We have a Guiding Coalition at each building, and I have expectations, and our principals know what those are." The South School District officially launched PLCs this year with Tiffany speaking to why she believes they are an important part of improving reading outcomes:

Even though we were playing with them a lot last year, we officially launched this year.

And so I think it's crucial. That's the next thing. I guess I'm willing to roll the dice. I think it

will take us to the next level in improving reading outcomes. We're a really new district in

analyzing data and truly using data and having our teachers use data. It's the only model

I think will get us there.

A principal from the South School district spoke to the value of PLCs in her school as she leads

for the improvement of reading outcomes:

I sit in seven hours worth of PLCs a week as a principal because it's important to

changing reading outcomes. And if I don't sit in those, then I'm saying to the team, this is

not important and I'm not here to support you. I feel like my attendance tells them, I'm

here to hold you accountable. I'm calling you up to our expectations. Not out, but up. I'm

there to answer questions. What should kids be learning as early readers? Let's engage

in unit planning for reading. Let's look at the reading focus standards to know what our

readers need to learn.

Clear evidence of leadership actions to establish and support PLCs/PLTs as a strategy to grow

their educators' capacity to teach reading as an important structure to support increased reading

outcomes existed in the artifacts I examined for each of the three school districts.

6. *Creating and Conducting Reading Fidelity Walks*

Creating and conducting reading fidelity/integrity walks is the sixth leadership task for the

directors of teaching and learning that emerged from my research when viewing it from the

structural frame. Each of the three districts I studied identified this as a part of their leadership

for literacy, and each of the districts have artifacts that articulated "look fors" as staff conduct

walkthroughs to ensure that the 5K–2 instructional strategies, adopted instructional materials,

and assessments are being utilized as intended district-wide and to provide feedback on

improving practice in the classrooms. The district leaders identified fidelity/integrity walks as an

important strategy in improving reading outcomes within their schools by providing educators

with insights into the implementation of the district-approved reading programing. In most instances, the fidelity/integrity walks were conducted by district and site leaders, including the directors of teaching and learning, principals, instructional coaches, and literacy support teachers. The walks they conducted typically involved observing teachers' adherence to instructional practices, curriculum fidelity, and the use of the adopted instructional materials. By regularly conducting fidelity/integrity walks, district directors and site leaders identified areas of strength and opportunities for improvement in reading instruction to drive targeted professional development and support for teachers. Additionally, district and site leaders use fidelity/integrity walks to foster a culture of accountability and continuous improvement, ensuring that reading instruction aligns with the identified evidence-based practices and ultimately leading to greater student achievement in literacy. One of the instructional coaches in the East School District discussed the importance of integrity walks with a principal at an elementary school in their district:

> We do fidelity checks and classroom walkthroughs. Last year we called them integrity walks. And really what it is . . . is it's a learning walk. So that way our administrators can be immersed in an entire lesson of this new curriculum and debrief afterwards and talk about "What have you noticed? What type of feedback would you give?" One of the barriers we noticed with our previous curriculum was that you could go into a first-grade classroom at each school and you would see different things, different interpretations, different assessments, different timing, and that's not fair to our students, nor was it leading to improved outcomes.

Embedding the structure of fidelity/integrity walks as a structural leadership action for the leaders in the North, South, and East School Districts played a role in the improvement of reading outcomes.

7. ***Allocating and Communicating Expectations for Minutes of Instruction for Reading***

The seventh district-level leadership action identified from the structural frame is the clear allocation and communication of expectations for instructional minutes for literacy instruction in 5K–2 classrooms. This is important because it identifies the time spent engaged in reading instruction as the top priority in the instructional day, and it ensures that students in 5K–2 classrooms have adequate time to engage in teaching and learning related to the essential standards. In each of the three districts, the staff members I interviewed could produce artifacts of the schedules created for the 5K–2 instructional day. In each instance, a large portion of the elementary day was spent on reading instruction ranging from one-third to one-half of the school day. Rick from the North School District had this to say about the 5K–2 instructional schedule:

> We have a minimum of time that you would see a literacy block in every building. Different grade levels in 5K–2 are going to have different amounts of time spent on different elements, but there's always going to be a reading focus lesson followed up by 45–60 minutes of small-group instruction time. There's going to be time for some foundational skills and time for the standard they're focused on.

One of the East School District principals described the importance of allocated time for reading that is clearly communicated as important in two ways: (1) it ensures that there is adequate time for reading instruction and (2) it ensures that the time allocated for reading instruction is focused on a combination of skills and knowledge instruction. He said, "In 5K–2, they have foundational skills and knowledge, because it's a knowledge-building curriculum. Our reading time is a total of 120 minutes." It is clear that the instructional schedule is tightly synced in the East School District, as each of the five staff members interviewed from East responded with nearly identical statements and an emphasis on the importance of allocated time for skills and knowledge. While the allocation of time is a structural task, it also surfaces as a leadership action when examined from the political frame, which I expand on later in this chapter.

In the analysis of the data I gathered, it is not surprising to see many leadership actions surface when reviewed from the structural frame. It is important that district leaders establish clear structures that lead to greater coherence from the district to the classroom for consistency and adherence to district-wide literacy expectations in service of improving reading outcomes, particularly when leading in systems with multiple elementary sites. In the next portion of this chapter, I focus on the human resource aspects of leadership when leading for improved reading outcomes.

Human Resource Leadership Tasks

The second frame through which I analyzed the leadership tasks that district leaders of teaching and learning undertook in the North, South, and East School Districts is the human resource frame. According to Bolman and Deal (2017): "The human resource frame centers on what organizations and people do for one another. Organizations generally hope for a cadre of talented, highly motivated employees who give their best" (p. 113). The underlying assumptions of the human resource frame are: human needs are to be served by organizations; organizations and people are interdependent; if there is not a good fit between an employee and an organization, both suffer the consequences; conversely, a good fit benefits both. As I examined the data I collected through the human resource frame, clear patterns for three leadership actions emerged with respect to ensuring strong leadership for literacy from the district level: (1) maintaining a deep knowledge base about reading among the district leaders themselves; (2) leading in collaboration with the district leaders and identified key staff, both internally and externally, to improve reading outcomes; and (3) leading professional development and job-embedded coaching to grow the skills and ability of district staff on the evidence-based skills and strategies to teach reading.

1. ***Maintaining a Deep Knowledge Base about Reading as District-Level Leaders***

I begin this portion of the chapter by focusing on the first leadership task when examined through the human resource lens, which is maintaining a deep knowledge base about reading

among the district-level leaders themselves (directors of teaching and learning and elementary curriculum coordinator). In the North, South, and East School Districts, the leaders entered their role with the requisite skills and knowledge about reading instruction along with background in and knowledge of strategies to improve reading outcomes at the 5K–2 level. Each of the four leaders I studied in the three districts had experience as teachers of core content and had served in several leadership roles as leaders of literacy prior to taking on their current roles at the district level. Each expressed a passion for reading and expressed the importance of early literacy for success in school and life as part of their core mission as a leader. While some of them had secondary literacy experience, each of them had deep experience at the elementary level with respect to teaching reading and/or leading for literacy. Ryan from the East School District started his educational career as a kindergarten teacher and served as an elementary principal prior to moving to the director of teaching and learning. Both roles gave him experience and knowledge in how early readers become literate. Tiffany from the South School District started as a secondary English educator and then moved to an elementary principal role prior to becoming the director of teaching and learning, which gave her background and experience in leading staff to improve reading outcomes. While Tiffany is a highly capable instructional leader with previous experience leading for improved reading outcomes as an elementary principal, she sought a co-leader in Sarah and shared the following rationale:

> I've never taught a child how to read, right? And I'm making these huge decisions about literacy practice. And so sometimes to make the decision, by the time that I ran around to my go-to teachers, we would get a month down the road from when I felt I had conversations with enough people to say, okay, I'm comfortable making this decision and not making the wrong decision for our system. I always say I know enough about early literacy to probably be really dangerous. It is all self-taught.

Sarah earned the position of co-leader along with Tiffany for the South School District and serves as the elementary curriculum coordinator. She has taught many grade levels and

has served as an instructional coach. Out of the four leaders I studied, Sarah is the only leader with a reading specialist license, which positioned her well to serve as Tiffany's partner as they co-led the improvement of reading instruction. Rick from the North School District served as primary school principal for early childhood, kindergarten, and first grade, where he learned a lot about leading early literacy improvement while working with his staff. He also served as the director of teaching and learning in his previous district prior to taking on the same role in the North School District. As district-level leaders, they are responsible for a vast number of content areas and additional responsibilities. Yet, each of them has background, knowledge, and experience in teaching and/or leading for improved reading outcomes, and they define early reading as their primary focus, where they spend the most time growing themselves as learners and the most time leading others in the system as compared to any other job responsibilities they have.

In addition to the background and skills they bring with them to their current roles, each of the district leaders has focused on continuously deepening their knowledge base and leadership skills through their own professional development. Each of the four leaders spoke at length about the professional development they have done themselves in the area of literacy in service of leading their systems to improve reading outcomes at the 5K–2 level. They each referenced professional learning opportunities, including deep reading and research with a focus on the science of reading and foundational skills; collaboration with external partners through job-alike groups, social media forums, and CESA staff; extensive reading of professional books; listening to podcasts; and attending conferences and/or university trainings. With respect to his professional learning, Ryan stated:

> I am keeping myself up to date with what's going on. I have to do that. I get in every morning before anybody else, and I spend the first hour of my day just reading some kind of professional literature and research articles. I'm working on Luisa Moats's speech

to print right now. It's killing me. It's long. I don't really get it, but it helps me know two things: (1), where things are at and (2) where we're going.

Tiffany spoke about the importance of all staff, including the administrators participating in LETRS training. LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) is an in-depth professional development program designed to enhance educators' knowledge and skills in teaching reading and spelling effectively, particularly for early readers. LETRS training focuses on providing educators with research-based strategies, instructional practices, and linguistic principles essential for promoting literacy development in students, especially those who are at risk of reading difficulties. When speaking about the LETRS training, Tiffany said: "The site administrators and I did the LETRS training. I always said we had to have everybody who would touch the reading life of a 5K–2 student trained, which included us." In the past, it would be unusual for district-level leaders and site-level leaders to engage in such in-depth training about how to teach reading, as it was common practice for administrators to have a high-level understanding of each of the content areas taught in elementary schools. Today it is an expectation for the administrators as well as educators to maintain a deep knowledge base about literacy instruction. This was evident in the three districts I observed as well, as a requirement in Act 20 calls for every administrator who works with 5K–3 students to have no less than six full days of professional development in evidence-based reading instruction.

The commitment to growing their own skills in reading instruction and modeling the way as lead learners by participating in in-depth professional development was clear among the four leaders in the three districts I studied.

2. Leading Reading in Collaboration with Others

When examining the data I gathered through the human resource frame, the second leadership action that emerged was the district leadership of teaching and learning leading in collaboration with other district leaders and key staff. The directors of teaching and learning established teams of key players, internally and externally, to ensure that a consistent message

and approach toward reading instruction occurred from the district level to the site level and across all sites throughout the districts. In each of the three organizations, the directors of teaching and learning identified their instructional coaches as their right-hand staff without whom they could not have launched successful programming. Ryan from the East School District spoke at length about the role coaches play in communicating a common message about reading instruction and ensuring that staff across the district are implementing the reading instruction to fidelity and according to the district guidance. In addition to clear communication and consistency of the rollout of the reading programming, the coaches played a pivotal role in supporting 5K–2 staff as they adapted to new instructional materials and new methods of teaching reading while navigating the shift from the M-S-V three-cueing approach to evidence-based reading instruction. When speaking of his coaches, Ryan said:

> So coaching has been, again, getting people involved with knowing the program and feeling comfortable with the program. Our coaches have, I mean, they've been unbelievable. They break down every unit. I'll say this, they silver platter things to our teachers. The first year we did it especially was just like, this is it. This is the assessment. This is the learning target. They were a shoulder to cry on for a lot of teachers because it was so different. They were question answer-ers. They were all of that and more.

An elementary principal in the East School District had similar sentiments as he spoke about the collaboration between the district leaders and the instructional coaches:

> Our district-wide reading work is a really big strategic process and to have people in the building (coaches) that understand it and are equipped to do it is key. They have a huge ability to do volumes of work. There's a clear direction from the director of teaching and learning and clear support from the coaches that are actually like boots on the ground doing it. And my impression is they spend enough time together to have a relationship that is really solid between the coaches and Ryan.

An elementary principal in the South School District shared statements along the same lines as the administrators from the East School District:

I think we're a team. So my instructional coach is my, the old saying, "behind every good leader is a great assistant." My instructional coach is my backbone to early literacy in this building. She has taught me on the fly. She was an amazing elementary teacher. She's an amazing instructional coach, and she buys into the risk-taking, and I love that about her.

In each of the three districts, clear evidence existed that the collaboration between the district leaders of teaching and learning and the instructional coaches at the site level played an integral role in the rollout of the curriculum, the design and delivery professional development, and the observation practice for providing feedback.

Another set of internal key players identified in each of the three districts with whom the directors of teaching and learning collaborated as a leadership action through the human resource frame were staff from departments beyond elementary teaching and learning. In each of the three school districts, directors and coordinators for students with special needs and multilingual learners were involved in the work every step of the way. During my observation of the weekly literacy team meeting in the East School District, the elementary director of teaching and learning and the director of student services / special education contributed equally on the processes related to improving reading outcomes, maintaining equal voice in the meeting, and sharing in decision-making when a district-level decision was made. In my observation at the North School District, lead teachers for students with disabilities and the district coordinator for multilingual learning were fully participating members of the district-wide leadership for literacy team and contributed to the work to ensure that decisions being made were inclusive of neurodivergent and multilingual learners. In the South School District, when I asked the superintendent which staff member he identifies as the person responsible for increasing reading outcomes, he stated, "It's Tiffany and Sarah from a general education perspective and

Carol, our director of student services, to ensure we are focusing on the special education layer that goes along with any instruction." It was clear in my observations and interviews that each of the three district leaders of teaching and learning attributed a part of their success to planning for all learners when designing reading curriculum and instructional practices by including the leaders for students with disabilities and multilingual learners as equal partners in this work alongside the directors of teaching and learning.

Beyond collaborating internally with district staff, establishing relationships and collaborating with external partners to improve reading outcomes is an important leadership task. In the North and South School Districts, the leaders formed a partnership with a CESA for professional development, curriculum writing and review, and district-wide literacy planning. As I observed the weekly literacy coaches meeting in the South School District and studied the running agenda for the team, references to the work with the CESA staff developer were present in the overall literacy plan and in professional development. The literacy leaders meeting I observed in the North School District was a full day meeting that was co-led by a CESA staff developer and the director of teaching and learning. The leaders of the North and South School District indicated they had sought an external partner to ensure that they were engaging their teams with experts in the field of reading with experience in creating district-wide reading plans that would align to the science of reading research and the Wisconsin Act 20 expectations. The East School District did not refer to a specific external partner, but rather several external experts with whom the director networked across the state and nation. Throughout my interview with Ryan and during my observation of the East School District literacy team meeting, references were made to the Wisconsin Reading League, the curriculum specialists from the instructional materials vendor, and social media affinity groups formed for the purpose of infusing the research related to the science of reading into 5K–2 classrooms.

3. *Leading Reading Professional Development and Job-Embedded Coaching*

In addition to the directors of teaching and learning growing their skills and abilities and identifying key partners internally and externally for the work, the third leadership action that emerged from my data analysis through the human resource frame was the procurement and organization of professional development for all 5K–2 staff. The professional learning provided for the 5K–2 educators typically fell into four categories: the use of the adopted instructional materials, foundational literacy skills (phonics and phonological awareness), Professional Learning Teams / Professional Learning Communities, and job-embedded coaching for classroom educators.

The North, South, and East School Districts each had an adopted set of core instructional materials for 5K–2 reading instruction. While their adherence to the materials varied, each of them provided initial and ongoing professional learning for the use of the materials. The North School District indicated that their initial training from the instructional materials vendor was the starting point for implementing their instructional materials with school district staff, providing ongoing training on the use of the instructional materials as part of new staff induction. The South School District invested significant time in the rollout and implementation of their instructional materials, beginning with initial training for all educators and follow-up site visits from external coaches associated with the instructional materials vendors. While there were many positive aspects to the training and materials, many staff struggled with the strict approach the staff developers had with the rollout and follow-up coaching on the materials, and Tiffany and Sarah had to work through some challenges. When speaking about the navigation of implementing the new materials and instructional methods for reading, Tiffany said:

> Our kids were learning how to read in the South School District, but how well they were learning to read was teacher dependent. Now, that data would also show by about second, third grade, that it disappeared. But student reading outcomes in 5K–1, it was dependent upon what classroom they were in. We had people very much choosing

pockets of what they were going to. How they taught a student how to read using a

hodgepodge of materials. So it was a huge focus for them that they leveled that playing

field with the Superkids resource. And, as I know you know, it was a really controversial

choice. The leader before me was super brave. He was super brave for the Superkids

decision. But when I stepped into this position, there was just a lot of anger. There was a

lot of anger about Superkids. I would say probably 75% of the 5K–2 staff, by the time I

got in this role, was liking it to loving it. But I would say about 25% of our 5K–2 staff were

angry. So when I stepped in, I did lots and lots of conversations. I was in a ton of

classrooms, did a ton of talking to the teachers to try to drill down to understand what are

you still fighting in this? Where is this going wrong? And I would say by the end of the

first year, I had just firmly decided we needed to get off of the focus of the Superkids

materials and on to early literacy professional development.

In the East School District, they began with initial training on their adopted instructional

materials and continued to focus on supporting the staff with using the materials by continuous

job-embedded coaching. For the first two years after adopting the instructional materials, the

coaches met with grade-level teams weekly to unpack the units as they were implemented. In

the third year of adoption, the coaches shifted their focus to coaching staff on the use of the

assessments in the instructional materials.

In addition to professional development related to the use of instructional materials, each

of the districts engaged their 5K–2 staff in professional learning on foundational literacy skills.

When speaking about the importance of professional learning for the primary-grade teachers in

foundational reading skills, the district-wide instructional coach for the North School District

stated:

We provided grades 5K–2 with a large amount of PD in the foundations of reading for

our students. Many times staff don't really understand some of the most important

foundational learning for reading, phonics, and phonemic awareness. We worked with

CESA 6, we did an early literacy training with our 5K–2 staff, and at the same time we read and discussed *Shifting the Balance* (Stenhouse, 2021) to understand the shifts and changes we needed to make in 5K–2.

Rick, also from the North School District, shared similar sentiments to the importance of professional learning for 5K–2 staff beyond the use of the initial instructional materials to professional learning related to impactful reading pedagogy, stating, "After professional development, we reteach the high-leverage routines that we would expect to see in the classroom, a phonics instruction routine, a vocabulary routine, an interactive read-aloud, and principals provide feedback."

The South School District Staff made a similar shift away from a focus on the instructional materials to professional learning on foundational literacy instructional practices when many teachers reported that they did not have a strong background in phonics. Sarah said:

So we started to research LETRS training, and we just thought it was something that our teachers needed based on the conversations we had had. We were finding that our adopted resource has these little teacher notes that teach phonic skills. And the teachers were like, "I didn't even know this until I taught the Superkids lesson." But it's not enough. It doesn't go deeply enough for them to feel super confident. And so through that LETRs training, we built foundational knowledge.

Evidence exists to support that the leadership action of providing professional learning for staff on the instructional materials and on foundational literacy practices plays a key role in improving reading outcomes at the 5K–2 level.

In an effort to better equip their site leaders to lead for improved reading outcomes, the East School District focused on their site leaders' training on leadership for literacy and the science of reading as opposed to investing time in training them on the adopted instructional materials. The chief academic officer stated, "We put all of our elementary administrators

through the AIMS Pathway training, which is a leadership literacy program, so that we could get all of our administrators and our literacy coaches up to speed in order to support the teachers." While each district's path was different, the focus on foundational skills in literacy was an area of focus for professional development.

The third area of focus for professional growth was learning about and implementing Professional Learning Communities and Professional Learning Teams (PLCs/PLTs). Directors, elementary principals, and coaches each identified collaboration of staff through PLC/PLT time as integral to their success in early reading and as important for training their staff well to fully engage in data-based decision-making to plan their reading strategies for students. The elementary coordinator in the South School District said:

We've really focused on PLC training this year. We sent a lot of staff to the Solution Tree training in Madison over the summer, and we've formed Guiding Coalitions. All of the coaches are attending the team-level meetings to observe and provide feedback on PLC processes. They're trying to make that a priority, that they're at each of those meetings, which takes up a good portion of their time.

One of the principals from the South School District remarked on the importance of professional learning related to PLCs and the path she took to lead her elementary staff through that learning:

Establishing PLCs took me seven years of baby-stepping because I didn't have district support. I was a PLC person from my previous district, so I was trying to do it with my staff off-the-cuff. Once Tiffany and Sarah stepped in, we began participating in formal PLC professional development, and we are a fully trained district. Prior to that, I was doing it off-the-cuff with no training. And you can see in our data . . . if you look at our data, it's climbing, climbing, climbing.

Clear evidence of PLC/PLT collaboration time existed in the instructional schedules of the K–2 staff, in the coaches' schedules for observation and coaching, and in the district-wide professional learning plans of each of the three districts.

Noticeably absent in the research I conducted on the three districts was professional development targeted at instructional pedagogy for institutionally marginalized learners, which is important to note due to the lagging reading outcomes for students outside of the dominant culture. While each of the three districts is seeing an increase in the reading outcomes of institutionally marginalized populations at grades 5K–2, the outcomes are not increasing at a great enough rate to close the gap between their performance and the performance of their white peers.

The other aspect of this leadership task that emerged through my data analysis with respect to the human resource frame was the district leaders' implementation and support of job-embedded coaching for 5K–2 staff in each of the three districts. I interviewed principals and coaches from each of the three districts to understand the role coaching plays in the professional growth of the 5K–2 staff. The North School District has one district-wide instructional coach as well as literacy support teachers (LSTs) at each of their sites. The LSTs serve a dual role of instructional coaching for part of the week and reading intervention with Tier III students for a portion of the week. When I asked Rick about the coaching protocols the district-wide instructional coach and LSTs use in their work with 5K–2 teachers in the North School District, he responded:

> I have a coaching guide that we wrote a handful of years ago, and it's really around Diane Sweeney's student-centered coaching, but with the district-wide coach being the only one doing nine-week cycles with two teachers, it's just not feasible for the district. We've kind of modified that philosophy. He's very good at a coaching cycle being mini-cycles. A couple-of-week cycles, but only one day a week instead of five days in the classroom with teachers.

When I posed the same questions to the district-wide coach from the North School District, he

stated:

> I started the year with just reaching out to principals and saying, "Listen, where do you
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> want me to be? Give me one to three different classrooms or curricular focuses that you
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> want me to attend or be part of so that I can really help your building in any way, shape,
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> or form." I also really felt the need to start the year visiting collaborative team times as
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> well. So that took precedence in my schedule because I wanted to be in those meetings
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> to see if the district as a whole, from building to building, at the elementary level was
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> somewhat cohesive as PLCs. We also use data from assessments like i-Ready to make
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> some of those decisions. So for the third quarter here, I've been watching our i-Ready
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> data in the district, and I've been making decisions as to who I think could be provided
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> more support to ensure there's best practices happening for students and their growth.

Through my conversations with the North School District staff, it became clear that coaching

plays an important role in the district's approach to improving reading outcomes using a

modified approach to student-centered coaching, data analysis, and site leadership requests for

support.

The responses about coaching protocols for 5K–2 staff were similar when I inquired

about them in the South and East School Districts. Everyone I interviewed in both of those

school districts identified the coaches' role and their work with their 5K–2 staff as integral to their

ability to increase reading outcomes, but a standard protocol for coaching did not appear to

exist. When I inquired about the coaching cycle protocols in the South School District, Tiffany

responded:

> When coaches came in, they originally chose a coaching model. When they came in,
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> their coaching model was student-centered coaching by Diane Sweeney. Maybe near
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> the end of the first year of 2020–2021, we decided not to have a district model for
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> coaching and decided to have a coaching model where they would go in where the

teacher was at and make decisions. Is this a case where I need to be more

student-centered? Is this the case where I need to direct it a little bit? Honestly, we have

a lot of work to do, probably as far as coaching models.

In the East School District, Ryan described their coaching model this way:

So for the first year of our instructional materials adoption coaching has been, again,

getting people involved with knowing the program and feeling comfortable with the new

materials. Now, as we're further into it this year, the coaches are focusing a lot on

assessment just because that was a big thing, because the assessments that we are

giving are difficult and hard and teachers freaked out.

An instructional coach from the same district described her work in a similar way:

We made a switch from balanced literacy to structured literacy, and we focused on the

materials. This year we get to focus on some next steps. And so this year we'll be

immersing ourselves a lot in responding to teacher needs and their feedback that was

extremely important to us. We had a feedback form that teachers utilized all year long, in

addition to the fact that we had met with them every other week all year. That was last

year. And so now when we meet with teachers, we've kind of moved on the continuum

looking at our assessment.

In each of the three districts, it was clear that the establishment and support of

job-embedded professional learning through instructional coaching as a leadership action

played an important role in the professional growth of 5K–2 teachers, with varying approaches

and a somewhat organic nature to the work based on a combination of district- , site- , and

data-based needs.

The leadership actions of maintaining a deep knowledge base about reading among

district-level leaders, collaborating with key players as instructional leaders, and growing the

skills and knowledge of 5K–2 staff in their ability to teach young children to read was evident in

the data I gathered in the three districts I studied. As a practitioner and researcher, this makes

sense to me, as teaching a child to read is a complex, nuanced endeavor that takes place between an educator and a student. Having the right staff, growing the adult practices of the 5K–2 staff in reading, and supporting the use of instructional materials and impactful reading strategies through coaching are integral leadership actions to increase reading outcomes.

Political Leadership Tasks

The third frame through which I analyzed the leadership tasks the district leaders of teaching and learning undertook in the North, South, and East School Districts was the political frame. According to Bolman and Deal (2017), "[P]olitics is the realistic process of making decisions and allocating resources in a context of scarcity and divergent interests. This view puts politics at the heart of decision making" (p.180). The political frame is based on several assumptions: that organizations are made up of people who form coalitions as individuals and as parts of different interest groups; that members of different coalitions have differences in the way they interpret events and activities due to differing values, beliefs, and information; that decisions related to the allocation of resources are highly political; and that decisions in organizations are highly influenced among competing factions within the same organization (Bolman and Deal, 2017).

In my thirty years as a practitioner, early literacy has always been an important topic in school districts, as it lays the foundation for all other learning throughout the K–12 experience and beyond. As a former primary-grade teacher and elementary principal, I can attest that the majority of our time, money, and professional learning has been devoted to teaching young children how to read. It is an area of passion and heated debate for educators. In my experience, this has never been more true than it is now. With a state and nation in which approximately one third of our students read on grade level, there is a clear focus on early literacy and a push for reform from balanced literacy to evidence-based literacy instruction. The

pushback against the Teachers College Units of Study and other balanced literacy approaches reached its height during and after the pandemic when, during virtual at-home learning, parents and caregivers had a firsthand view of how reading was taught at the early grade levels. The research emerging through what is now called the science of reading established a need to move away from the M-S-V (meaning, syntax, visual) three-cueing technique to teach reading and toward a focus on foundational skills instruction using a knowledge-based curriculum. The evidence-based reading movement has become increasingly political as state governments have taken an active role in dictating what is and what is not allowable in reading instruction in public schools. Mississippi was the first state to pass a series of laws starting in 2013 to change the state's approach to teaching reading, and they saw increases in reading outcomes by 2019. Other states across our country have adopted similar legislation following the Mississippi model. As of 2024, thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia have passed laws or implemented new policies related to evidence-based reading instruction since 2013 (Schwartz, 2024).

Wisconsin is one of the thirty-seven states that passed science of reading legislation with the passing of Wisconsin Act 20 on July 19, 2023. According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction website (2024):

Act 20 states that all Wisconsin schools are required to provide science-based early literacy instruction in both universal and intervention settings. Science-based early literacy instruction is defined as instruction that is systematic and explicit and consists of all the following:

- Phonological awareness
- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Building background knowledge
- Oral language development
- Vocabulary building

- Instruction in writing

- Instruction in comprehension

- Reading fluency

Phonics is defined as the study of the relationships between sounds and words; this includes alphabetic principle, decoding, orthographic knowledge, encoding and fluency. The timing of this research and its overlap with the passage of Act 20 in the state of Wisconsin surfaced three leadership actions in my data when viewing it from the political frame, including the leaders' need to communicate with stakeholders about reading; the selection and adoption of evidence-based instructional materials for reading instruction at the primary level; and the allocation of significant funds and time focused on reading instruction for leaders, staff, and instructional schedules.

1. ***Communicating with Stakeholders about Reading***

The first leadership tasks that emerged from the research when examining tasks through the political frame was communicating with stakeholders about the district's reading instruction, why the district was shifting their instruction to an evidence-based reading program, and commitments to the North, South, and East School District communities at large to improve instructional outcomes in 5K–2 reading. The stakeholder groups with whom the district leaders of teaching and learning communicated most that had overlap among the three systems included the school board, parents/caregivers, school district leaders, and site-level educators. When analyzing the groups with whom Rick communicates in the North School District, I found evidence of communication to the superintendent through weekly meetings and presentations to the school board throughout the year as an integral part of their strategic plan and reporting on metrics. Rick communicates with these stakeholder groups as a leadership strategy to share the rationale for the shift in reading instruction and to assure the school board and greater community that the district had plans in place to continuously improve reading outcomes with a commitment to continuously share progress data with the school board throughout the process.

When I interviewed the superintendent of the North School District and asked him about communicating with the board as a leadership strategy, he stated:

> I think we do a really good job of keeping them regularly informed of what performance looks like. We monitor metrics specific to literacy performance across grade levels because we have that as an identified metric. It's something that we talk about multiple times a year. It's a priority for them and for our district. I should say there's a fair amount of pride in how our students do and how they're growing relative to reading at the younger levels.

In addition to consistently communicating with the superintendent and school board about the district's plans to improve reading instruction at the 5K–2 level, Rick communicates about reading instruction regularly with site leaders through frequent team meetings, professional development, and by conducting integrity walks with the site leaders. He conducts two-way communication with his teaching and learning team, which is inclusive of special education staff, multilingual educators, literacy support teachers, and the district-wide instructional coach, through monthly meetings where the team collaboratively develops professional learning, pacing guides, curriculum, and supporting documents for educators with respect to the expectations for reading instruction and PLCs. The members of the teaching and learning team then communicate with their respective sites and bring back feedback to be considered as their reading programming evolves. This communication from the district level to the site level, with feedback from the sites coming back to the district, is an important leadership task through the political frame. It is a strategy to form a tight coalition with and among staff who are making instructional shifts in a politically charged environment that has a potential to drift from the district expectations related to reading instruction, which could result in a lack of improved reading outcomes in the primary grades.

Similar to the North School District, the leaders of the South School District prioritize communication with the school board about reading instruction as a strategy to lead through the

politics of the most recent reading wars and Act 20 in the state of Wisconsin. They communicate with the school board in a manner that keeps them in front of any media headlines that are causing alarm across the country about schools failing young learners in reading if they are not using evidence-based practices to teach reading at the 5K–2 level. When analyzing the stakeholder groups with whom Tiffany and Sarah communicate in the South School District, clear evidence exists of communication among the administrators and the school board to keep them abreast of the district's continuous improvement efforts related to reading instruction and the migration to evidence-based reading instruction and Act 20 expectations. The superintendent of the South School District said:

> That's where our district office team is shifting right now. I am keeping our teams front and center. So one of the steps, it's not necessarily that we're solely reporting out on 5K–2 literacy, but we're bringing our schools forward twice a year now to present what their school goals are, what their school priorities are, what their action steps are going to be, and getting that in front of the board so that the conversation does stay academic. It stays on increasing student outcomes in early literacy.

A theme that arose related to communication for both Tiffany and Sarah was the amount of time they spend in classrooms listening to and communicating with teachers. They both identified this as an important leadership task to ensure they were learning from and with teachers as they navigated the implementation of new instructional materials and instructional practices to teach early reading. Tiffany and Sarah indicated that they use these conversations to build coalitions with and among site-level staff as well as to proactively or reactively communicate when adjustments to the instructional materials or instructional strategies are needed based on staff feedback and/or data. When speaking about Tiffany and how she builds coalitions with and among staff while seeking feedback for adjustments, Sarah explained:

> I think another piece that is amazing with Tiffany is the fact that she takes feedback from teachers. She has conversations with them. She is the type of person who people are

willing to speak honestly with because she has formed relationships with them. She's very good at listening to and leading based on teacher feedback, and having conversations with the people who need to be involved to make good decisions for our students, but also our staff. We know that our staff is with the kids, and often they're an untapped resource.

Sarah also discussed how she builds relationships and communicates with the instructional coaches and site-level educators as another leadership strategy to form strong partnerships and coalitions, and to ensure consistency of messaging and programming throughout the district:

Being really close with the instructional coaches and working with them is important. I'm involved in a lot of discussions and always trying to make sure that I'm communicating out with the right people the information they need in a timely manner. I'm in schools a lot. One of the most important ways for me to be able to become stronger in my job is to actually be in the classroom, seeing things happening, because I don't want to become too far removed from the work of improving reading outcomes.

Beyond school district staff and the school board, Tiffany spoke about communicating with parents and caregivers about their work to improve reading outcomes and to fully embrace evidence-based reading as a political leadership move, as she leads in a conservative community with constituents reacting to mainstream media headlines about how schools are failing to teach children to read. She described her strategy like this:

We did a very political move at the end of last year. We put together a science of reading video, "The South School District and the Science of Reading." We blasted it everywhere just because we knew the phrase was out there. We knew the podcasts were out there. Honestly, for our conservative community, this will be a play. We needed the bounce of "this school system is great." We did a video and blasted it everywhere to clearly

communicate, "We're teaching your children how to read. You can leave the political

rhetoric alone."

Further evidence of Tiffany and Sarah's communication to and among staff existed in the

instructional coaches' agenda, which had captured multiple staff updates that communicated

direction, resources, and expectations for reading that were shared district-wide.

In the East School District, evidence existed of Ryan's communication to the chief

academic officer and superintendent, the school board, and the literacy team, which is inclusive

of multiple departments and the instructional coaches. When speaking about communicating

with the school board, the chief academic officer for the school district identified this task as an

important leadership task to overcome some resistance from a school board member whose

spouse worked for a competing resource company. The communication strategy was twofold:

(1) to assure the board members of the district's ability to grow reading outcomes using the

instructional materials they had selected, and (2) to prevent a coalition from forming among

school board members to vote against the adoption of the instructional materials. When

speaking about the situation, the chief academic officer said:

We had a board member, his wife actually worked for a competing company. We spent

way too much time communicating with him, but he also had enough sway with a couple

of board members that then they became questioning. We had never had that before.

We had done a math review two years before. It was like a rubber stamp, hardly anyone

even came in to look at the resources.

In addition to communicating with the school board, careful attention was paid to

communicating with the East School District staff through a steady drip of information through

district communication vehicles over time. Ryan and the instructional coaches were intentional

about a slow, steady drip of information over time as a political strategy to avoid resistance to

the shift away from balanced literacy and towards a structured, evidence-based reading

program and to grow a culture of team commitment to the new instructional materials and

reading strategies that were being adopted in grades 5K–2. When discussing this leadership

task, one of the instructional coaches stated:

> We went from being a balanced-literacy district to essentially making a 180-degree turn
>
> in our choice in the ELA program with Amplify. Three or four years ago, we started to
>
> communicate little nuggets of information out to staff about the science of reading and
>
> then gradually increased the frequency to communicate about the heavy lift of more
>
> intensive learning for all of us related to phonics and phonemic awareness. Then we
>
> shifted the communication to send a message that we're all in this together.

As I examined the artifacts and interview data, there was evidence of clear

communication to a variety of internal and external stakeholders as a strategy to increase the

staff knowledge of the shifts that were occurring and to form positive coalitions for the work

between district-level and site-level staff and across all schools. While each of the three districts

have made great efforts to communicate internally and externally with the majority of their

stakeholders, it is important to note the lack of reference to communicating with the families of

institutionally marginalized populations about the importance and urgency of focusing on the

reading outcomes for their children, as an opportunity gap persists from their peers. The

communication strategies and solicitation of input and feedback are strategies that traditionally

reach the families in the dominant culture, resulting in a lack of inclusion, feedback, and

participation from families of color, multilingual families, and families living at or below the

poverty line.

2. *Selecting and Adopting Evidence-Based Instructional Materials for Reading*

The second leadership action that arose through the data when viewed from the political

frame was the selection and adoption of evidence-based instructional materials for reading

instruction at the primary level. Prior to the current set of instructional materials in each of the

three districts, all had been using the Teachers College Units of Study or another

balanced-literacy approach to teaching reading. The shift from those materials to

research-based instructional materials was a political shift that each of the three directors had to manage through curriculum committees and selection processes with teams of teachers. In addition to local selection criteria, the state of Wisconsin has established criteria for selecting instructional materials under Wisconsin Act 20, section 12(1m), requiring the reading curriculum and instructional materials to include all of the components of science-based early reading instruction. Conversely, the curricula and instructional materials cannot include the three-cueing system for teaching reading. This was a major political shift because many schools in Wisconsin and across the nation were teaching reading using the Teachers College Units of Study and the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment system, both of which included the three-cueing instructional approach to teaching reading. The leaders of the three systems navigated this political shift by engaging staff in their respective curriculum renewal and design processes with updated rubrics to reflect the components of the science-based early reading instruction. When describing the approach he used to navigate the politics of moving to a very different set of reading instructional materials to be used in the East School District, Ryan stated: "We spent a lot of time on the back end with teachers getting to know what the science of reading means and what's a good resource to use. Our strategy was to understand the science of reading before starting our instructional materials selection process."

Rick employed a different leadership strategy when leading his staff through the selection of 5K–2 instructional materials as a political task, as he felt that some staff might resist the migration from the Units of Study to an evidence-based reading program. He engaged his staff in a deep study of the evidence that existed related to the outcomes realized by districts using evidence-based reading materials. Rick stated: "We used Ed Reports and other independent reviews to help select which instructional materials to review, as well as taking a look at some different reading rubrics that we created based on what we learned from the literature on science of reading and created our own rubric."

After the instructional materials adoption team pared the resources down to two possible options, Rick carefully selected teachers from every grade level and each of the five elementary schools in the North School District to pilot one of the two sets of instructional materials. In addition to ensuring that staff at every grade level and in every school were engaged in the selection as a strategy for political buy-in to the new instructional materials, Rick involved the staff in observing their peers using the materials and gave them the opportunity for input based on their observations. At the end of the pilots, the committee came to consensus and chose the set of instructional materials to be implemented with very little resistance from staff across the district because they were included and had some input into the selection process.

The South School District used a similar selection process to adopt their instructional materials (Superkids), which were adopted the year prior to Tiffany moving into the director role. While they had diligently worked to build coalitions around and support for the new instructional materials, they did encounter staff resistance after a year of implementation. South School District staff expressed anger and dissatisfaction with the choice of the instructional materials. In her role as the director of teaching and learning, Tiffany combatted this political resistance to the new materials by engaging in conversation with staff to learn more about their concerns and to plan a path forward. When describing that time and her leadership actions, Tiffany said:

> I did lots and lots of conversations and was in a ton of classrooms to drill down and understand why they were fighting the adoption and where things were going wrong. After many conversations, I firmly shifted the conversation off of Superkids and onto early literacy instruction.

The leadership move Tiffany made was to engage all 5K–3 staff and leaders in in-depth LETRS training to deepen their knowledge and skills related to phonemes, phonics, and early literacy reading strategies as opposed to focusing on the adopted instructional materials. While they continued to use Superkids, staff were able to engage in the adopted materials more effectively and nimbly after LETRS training due to the depth of knowledge they gained about

foundational reading skills and strategies. This leadership move dissipated the anger and discontent from the site-level staff and led to deeper buy-in, which yielded better results in student outcomes due to the effective use of instructional materials that were developed in support of evidence-based instruction in 5K–2 reading instruction.

It is important to note that absent from the narrative about instructional materials were strategies and processes to ensure that the materials were culturally relevant and inclusive of all learners, which is an integral component to the selection of materials as a strategy to close the opportunity gap for institutionally marginalized readers at the K–2 level.

3. *Allocating Significant Funds and Time for Reading*

The third leadership action that arose when examining leadership tasks through the political frame was the allocation of time with respect to how the district-level leaders allocated their own time and instructional time throughout the school day for all 5K–2 classrooms across the district. In each of the three districts studied, improving reading instruction was the priority above all else at the elementary level, even with the expectation that elementary students master standards in reading, math, science, and social studies along with encore classes like art, music, and physical education. Each of the district leaders indicated, without hesitation, that early literacy is their priority and that it takes precedence over other content areas in the primary grades. When I asked Rick, Tiffany and Sarah, and Ryan to take a look at their calendars and identify the amount of their workweek that is focused on improving reading outcomes, each indicated that reading was the focus of the majority of their time. When ascertaining the amount of time Sarah, the elementary coordinator for the South School District, spends each week on improving literacy outcomes, Tiffany stated: "I would say 75% of her calendar, probably almost 100% this summer. The amount of curriculum work she did this summer with our staff to teach reading was insane." When I asked Ryan about how his time is focused during his workweek, he responded: "Right now the focus is on literacy. Our plan is about a five- to eight-year plan to make sure we get this all turned around. And that's not only just curriculum intervention, it's a

whole ecosystem of literacy within our district." Comments similar to these were consistent across all of the interviews regardless of role. District-level directors, site leaders, coordinators, instructional coaches, and learning support teachers all reported a clearly stated primary focus on improving reading outcomes as the majority of their workweek.

In addition to how the district leaders for the North, South, and East School Districts allocate their time as an important resource, each spoke to the importance of allocating the required time for literacy instruction in the 5K–2 daily schedule. In each of the three districts, I reviewed artifacts that were published schedules for how the minutes of the instructional day are allocated in 5K–2. Across all districts and grade levels, I saw approximately 90–120 minutes of literacy instruction daily.

Below you will see a kindergarten schedule (figure 7) from the North School District. Documents similar to this are key artifacts, as they demonstrate that a district is seeking to provide clarity and consistency for the allocation of the instructional minutes for the school day across all grade levels and schools. This is a strategy to ensure that all students have access to a guaranteed and viable curriculum within a school district, minimizing noninstructional time and focusing the school day on learning. Instructional minutes allocation documents are typically created by the district-level director of teaching and learning following Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction recommended minutes of instruction along with the recommended instructional minutes by the publishers of the instructional materials. The district-level director of teaching and learning seeks input from site-level administrators, teacher leaders, and classroom educators on an annual basis to update and publish the documents for the start of the school year.

Figure 7

North School District's Kindergarten Instructional Minutes Allocation

Classroom Engagement & Routines Anchor	Kindergarten	Gradual Release: I do it,

Charts		We do it, You do it together, then You do it alone.

Literacy Component	Definition	Suggestions	Into Reading Resource(s)
Shared Reading	A whole-group instructional context in which the teacher displays an enlarged text to the class and students join in or share the reading with guidance and support from the teacher. Shared reading provides opportunities for teacher modeling with "think alouds" as well as student participation practicing foundational and comprehension skills.	A minimum of 2–3 times weekly for 10–15 minutes. Tier 1 and/or 2	Reading lessons with connections to phonics, grade-level text, foundational skills, etc.
			Pre-Decodable Texts
			Rigby Readers
			Big Book
Interactive Writing	A cooperative event in which the teacher and students jointly compose and write text. During **Interactive Writing**, the teacher models reading and writing strategies while engaging students in creating the text. The teacher and students share both the decisions about what to write and the duties of scribing the text.	Done daily for 10–15 minutes. Tier 1 and/or 2	Writing/Reading lessons focused on sharing the pen with clear goals and purposeful language.
			My Book (done whole-group)
*** Can be done with an extensive number of resources from Into Reading.			

Phonics and Word Study	**Phonics:** The relationship between letters and sounds. Usually whole-group explicit instruction.	15–20 minutes daily	Daily Show & Teach Slides
			Vocabulary Cards
		Foundational Skills time	Display & Engage Slides
			Know It Show It Pages
		Tier 1 and/or 2	Vocabulary/Phonics Interactive Practice
		Morning Meeting	Alphafriend Card/Video
*** Should be done continuously throughout the day, not just during foundational skills time.			

Literacy Component	Definition	Recommended Time	Into Reading Resource(s)
Independent Reading	Students work on independent reading while the teacher pulls small groups or confers. Stamina must be built during the first months of school to achieve the recommended minutes.	30 minutes daily	Rigby Readers
			Start Right Readers
			iRead Decodables
			Benchmark Decodables, Book Room, & Library
			Weekly Literacy Centers
			Anchor Charts (class/individual copy)
			Graphic Organizers (completed version)
			Tabletop Mini-Lessons
Teacher Instruction (Mini-Lesson)	Short, direct, and detailed lesson to teach a reading strategy with demonstration and guided practice for students.	10–15 minutes daily	Big Book
			Read-Aloud Book
			Anchor Charts
			Graphic Organizers
*** A desirable recommended time for all curricular areas (if possible).			

Interactive Read Aloud	A whole-group instructional context in which the teacher reads a selected text aloud to the whole class, occasionally and selectively pausing for conversation. Interactive Read Aloud provides opportunities for intentional modeling by the teacher, as well as practice for students as they think, talk about, and respond to prompts from the teacher.	A minimum of 2–3 times a week for 15–20 minutes Tier 1 and/or 2	Read-Aloud Book
*** Can be done with numerous curricular focuses (e.g., social studies).			
Traditional Read Aloud	Is generally done whole-group (carpet, table, desks, etc.).	Usually done during snack time	Big Book
			Read-Aloud Book

In each of the three districts, similar artifacts exist at the 5K–2 levels. The leaders have made it clear, by producing instructional minute allocation schedules, that literacy is the focus of the 5K–2 instructional day. This leadership task is in service of ensuring that staff and students have adequate time for reading instruction and a consistent learning experience in classrooms across the district.

The leaders of all three school districts spoke at length about the allocation of significant financial resources in service of the improvement of reading instruction over any other content area or district initiative. Each of the three school districts have a comprehensive set of

evidence-based instructional materials for their 5K–2 classrooms. When the chief academic

officer for the East School District spoke about the allocation of district funds for their 5K–5

instructional materials adoption for literacy she said, "We're talking several hundred thousand

dollars. I mean, we were probably close to $800,000 for our instructional resource alone." The

other two districts spent similar amounts of district funds proportionate to the size of their

student enrollment.

In addition to core instructional materials, each district spent significant funds on

professional learning. In the South School District, Tiffany and Sarah allocated funds for any

staff member working with students in 5K–2 to be trained in LETRS in order to deepen the

phonics knowledge of their staff. They invested significant funds in sending staff to the Solution

Tree conference in the summer to strengthen their ability to collaborate in PLCs in order to

make data-driven instructional plans to increase literacy outcomes. And, they contracted with

CESA for systematic planning support and professional development. Each of the other two

districts made similar investments in staff training and partnerships. Additional training for all

school districts in the state of Wisconsin is mandated under Act 20. The statute requires a

six-day literacy professional development for every 5K–3 administrator by July 2025 and a

state-approved educator training for all staff in 5K–3 schools by July 2026.

When conducting this portion of the research, I was struck by the absence of data on the

allocation of funds through the lens of equity in each of the three school districts as an important

strategy for the district-level leaders especially given the fact that each of the districts has Title

and non-Title schools with additional federal funding allocated to the improvement of instruction

for students living at or below the poverty line.

In addition to allocating significant resources for the improvement of reading outcomes,

the site leaders I studied devoted time to managing the emotions of staff as they navigated the

shift away from Teachers College Units of Study, balanced literacy, and the three-cueing

system. I discuss this further in the next section when analyzing leadership tasks through the symbolic frame.

Symbolic Leadership Tasks

In closing out the analysis of the Four Frames, I focused on the symbolic leadership tasks that the district leaders of teaching and learning undertook in the North, South, and East school districts. According to Bolman and Deal (2017), "The symbolic frame focuses on how myth and symbols help humans make sense of the chaotic, ambiguous world in which they live." (p. 236). Bolman and Deal identify several underlying assumptions for the symbolic frame, including the multiple perceptions of events and activities among different members of organizations; the meaning assigned to activities and events outweighs what actually happened; when uncertainty exists among a community, symbols are used to assist members of the community in finding their way and feeling anchored to the community; and the culture that brings people together is heavily intertwined with the symbols associated with the organization (Bolman and Deal, 2017). When examining the data I collected from the North, South, and East School Districts through the symbolic frame, two leadership themes arose. The first theme was the leadership actions from district-level leadership to build and maintain a sense of district identity and pride about their reading outcomes. The second theme was the leadership actions enacted by the district-level leaders to manage the emotions staff were experiencing as they shifted away from their former instructional materials and instructional strategies for reading at the 5K–2 level.

1. *Building and Maintaining a Sense of District Identity and Pride about Reading*

The first leadership action that arose when examining the data through the symbolic lens was the strategic steps the leaders took to build and maintain a sense of district identity and pride about their ability to ensure that students are growing as literate human beings. In each of the three districts I studied, it was clear the district leaders built and maintained a sense of pride about being high-performing districts who place a high value on literacy. During my interview

with the superintendent of the North School District, he started our conversation by describing the pride the district community placed on being a district who ensures that students learn to read well as a result of their reading instruction:

> We've had a pretty strong culture with literacy, and that goes back over the years. I've been in this district now for fourteen years, and I've seen a few different approaches to reading instruction. There's always been a really strong core group that really advocates for early literacy and is really passionate. We've always had really great champions of that work, and the culture and understanding of what we need to be doing to ensure our kids can read is a point of pride for us. I can't understate the great people we have on staff here and their passion for literacy.

> Similar sentiments were shared during my interview with the chief academic officer for the East School District. Her face lit up and she spoke animatedly and with pride about their reputation as a high-performing district and a leader in literacy in the state of Wisconsin and beyond. She spoke to their future goals, saying: "So we felt like this is our shot. Our shot is that by the year 2030, we are going to be the highest-achieving school district in the state of Wisconsin. We've put all the strategies in place for any student that comes to our district to be successful." Tiffany spoke with pride as she described the growth they have experienced in reading outcomes resulting from the evidence-based reading instruction they adopted:

> And we finally saw it on the Forward Exam in our third-grade data. We're happy, and we just set an even greater goal for the next round of assessment. I think we were at 64.5% proficiency at our third-grade level, which moved us ahead of pretty much everybody in our area. And it's not that it's about the competition, right? But who doesn't glance over and see where we were five years ago and where we're at this point and our increase in reading outcomes. And our teachers are consistently telling us that they feel confident in their literacy instruction and are excited about the student outcomes in reading. We

have a lot of data to show this is working, that we are successful. We honestly could not

be more thrilled right now with our early literacy data.

The sense of pride and culture related to literacy was evident in each of the three

districts throughout the interviews and in comments made by teams during team meetings.

2. ***Managing and Leading through Staff Emotions Related to Reading Instruction***

The second leadership strand that emerged from the data analysis using the symbolic

frame was the leader's actions to manage and lead through staff emotions as they mourned the

loss of their previous instructional materials and instructional practices. The symbolic shift away

from balanced literacy, Teachers College Units of Study, and the three-cueing system was a

topic throughout the interviews I conducted. As a practitioner, I have been involved in

professional learning at Teachers College, have implemented the Units of Study in two districts

as a district leader, and have supported the implementation of the materials in districts across

southeast Wisconsin as a consultant. For many districts, being a "Lucy Calkins district" was a

point of pride and was seen as the gold standard for literacy instruction for at least twenty years

in the state of Wisconsin. Prior to the publication of the Units of Study Heinemann kits in the

early 2010s, educators could access the materials produced by Teachers College only by

attending summer institutes on the Teachers College campus in New York City, and seats for

the summer institutes sold out quickly. The institute began every year with Lucy Calkins herself

delivering the keynote address from the same pulpit Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke from, with

sunlight streaming through the stained glass windows. Those of us who attended were called to

action to change literacy and to ensure that we saw our readers as more than a test score.

Stepping away from being defined as a Lucy Calkins district has been a difficult task for leaders

to manage as a symbolic shift. The chief academic officer for the East School district shared

how Ryan and their instructional coaches led through the emotion of shifting away from the

Units of Study and their identification as a Teachers College partner school:

There were teachers that were crying and there's teachers who were mad. But I think he navigated all of that very, very well. To the point I only had to have a couple of conversations with people because he was navigating the emotion by listening and reemphasizing why we needed to change so that we can ensure all kids can read when they leave our system. I think he and the coaches took the first brunt of the emotional responses of staff. They listened, were patient, and supported them with the new materials.

When Ryan spoke of leading through that emotional time as his staff were mourning the loss of the Units of Study, he said:

We moved from a balanced-literacy Lucy Calkins model using M-S-V three-queuing, all that stuff. We were hardcore with that. In fact, one of our old coaches now works for Lucy Calkins. It's just like one of those things. If you look at the old 2016 materials, it says, special thanks to some of our schools in the East School District, because Teachers College staff were trying their materials in our schools back then. So it's like, we had that deep connection, and we came to the realization that it's like, wait, we're not teaching kids how to read well. So, we worked our way through this whole movement from kids figuring it out on their own to systematic, explicit instruction. We shared information over time, the coaches supported our staff, and we managed the loss staff were feeling.

In addition to working through the loss of the identity of being a Lucy Calkins district, the leaders in the three districts spoke about supporting staff as they shifted from the three-cueing system of teaching reading to a research-based foundational reading approach. This shift was discussed as a painful time for staff and a time of mourning and questioning themselves as "good teachers" with a sense of having failed previous students by relying on the-three cueing system and not providing systematic phonics instruction. When speaking about this painful shift during a meeting observation in the North School district, the CESA staff developer said:

We were talking about how in the 5K–2 book, what was the emotional shift? It was

M-S-V, right? And shifting because we've been doing running records for years, and

leveled texts for years, and guided reading for years. And then we feel like we did

something wrong if we're being questioned or being pushed to think a different way. And

Jan and Kari sort of named that as the emotional shift of 5K–2. But being asked to

rethink that and reconsider what we've been doing and feeling good about might be

emotional, might feel emotional to people who are thinking, How many people's lives did

I ruin?

In each of these instances, the leaders consistently reassured staff that they were doing

what they knew to be past practice at that time, but a shift in instructional practices is needed

now that the research is clear. The leaders reported a sense of relief and ability for staff to let go

of some of the emotion as their reading outcomes improved over time.

As with the other findings in the research, conversation about the gap between the 5K–2

reading outcomes for institutionally marginalized students and their peers was nearly

nonexistent. In each of the school districts, all 5K–2 students were making gains in reading

achievement, but the gains for the institutionally marginalized students were not enough to

catch up and close the gap with the other students. While each of the districts expressed pride

about their reading programming and increased outcomes, I was surprised at the lack of

acknowledgment in their statements that they had significant work to do to ensure that

institutionally marginalized students were proficient readers by the end of second grade.

Rick, Tiffany, Sarah, and Ryan each exhibited adaptive leadership strategies to address

the structural, human resource, political and symbolic challenges that arose as they led the

process of improving reading outcomes at the 5K–2 level. All of the leadership actions that have

been illuminated in chapter 4 are in service of ensuring that the essential conditions for reading

instruction are present in 5K–2 learning environments for many students, but not all. In chapter

5, I discuss the essential conditions that arose in my research.

CHAPTER 5: Findings from the North, South, and East School Districts

Essential Conditions for Reading Instruction at the Primary Level

In the previous chapter, I shared the leadership actions that the leaders of the North, South, and East School Districts undertook to improve reading outcomes. Their leadership actions led to the establishment of the essential conditions necessary in 5K–2 learning environments to grow reading outcomes at the primary grade levels. This thread of the research is in service of my second research question: What are the essential conditions for literacy achievement at the primary level? In this chapter, I focus on the findings that address my second question through my artifact review, interviews, and observations. I examined my data to determine the presence (or lack) of the essential conditions for reading outcomes to grow at the primary grades that were revealed through my literature review. I remained open in my analysis and identified essential conditions that had not arisen in the literature review but that were present in at least two of the three districts I studied.

Evidence of essential conditions for reading achievement to grow at the 5K–2 level existed with strong overlap in the North, South, and East School Districts. In this chapter, I identify the four essential conditions that emerged from the data: (1) evidenced-based reading instruction, (2) a comprehensive set of reading instructional materials aligned to evidence-based instruction and inclusive of content knowledge, (3) small-group reading instruction that is responsive to student needs, and (4) access to robust and inclusive classroom libraries.

Essential Condition 1: Evidence-Based Reading Instruction

The commitment to evidence-based reading in the North, South, and East School Districts was easily discernible in every aspect of my research. During my interviews with the fourteen staff from the three districts, I posed the following question: What are the primary features of your 5K–2 reading programming? Without fail, each of the fourteen respondents began by identifying components of evidence-based reading instruction as the foundation for their primary reading instruction programming. Evidence-based reading instruction refers to

teaching methods and strategies that have been scientifically proven to be effective through research and empirical evidence. These methods are grounded in the findings of educational research and are typically supported by data that demonstrates their effectiveness in improving students' reading skills. The timing of this research in conjunction with the passage of Wisconsin Act 20 places the concept of evidence-based reading instruction at the forefront of district-level leaders' minds. Wisconsin Act 20 requires all districts to engage in science-based early literacy instruction, which it defines as systematic and explicit and inclusive of instruction on phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, building background knowledge, oral language development, building vocabulary, instruction in writing, instruction in comprehension, and reading fluency. Phonics is further defined as the study of the relationships between sounds and words; this includes alphabetic principle, decoding, orthographic knowledge, encoding and fluency (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2024). When talking about their reading instructional programming in the East School District, the instructional coach said: "With our new shift, it's phonics based. It's aligned to the science of reading research. It's phonics, and it's skills and knowledge. We have explicit, direct instruction in phonics, segmenting, and blending." The district-wide instructional coach for the North School District illuminated the importance of science-based reading instruction as a top priority for their district professional development over the past two years:

> We've provided a large amount of professional development about the foundational needs of reading instruction through our partnership with CESA. Most of our staff did not have a strong background in things like phonics, phonemic awareness, and blending. In addition to the learning with our partner at CESA, we did a district-wide book study of the book *Shifting the Balance* to understand the shifts we need to make in our classrooms based on what research says about how a child learns to read.

The instructional coach went on to say that foundational reading skills will continue to be their primary focus for the elementary grades along with a focus on high-leverage reading

strategies. Tiffany, the director of teaching and learning in the South School District, identified a need for more training on evidence-based reading instruction even after the district had adopted a set of instructional materials that were aligned to the science of reading research. Tiffany recalls her recognition of the need to do more professional development to grow her staff's capacity to teach foundational reading skills when she was observing an impactful 5K teacher who had excellent results with respect to growing reading outcomes. In conversation with the kindergarten teacher after the observation, Tiffany inquired as to why the classroom educator thought her student reading outcomes were so strong. The teacher suggested that her students were doing well because of her strong knowledge base of reading foundational skills. The teacher suggested LETRS training to grow the capacity of all of the staff. Tiffany did some additional research about the LETRS training program and proceeded to ensure that all of her 5K–3 staff had LETRS training as a strategy to strengthen their evidence-based reading instruction.

In addition to the site leaders of the districts raising the topic of evidence-based reading instruction as a key feature of the primary-grade reading programming, the district leaders referenced Scarborough's Reading Rope as a guide for their instructional programming in reading. Scarborough's Reading Rope (figure 8) is a representation of the complex set of skills and processes involved in proficient reading. It was developed by literacy researchers Scarborough and Vellutino in 2001. The rope metaphor illustrates the interdependent nature of various components of reading through two intertwined strands that represent word recognition and language recognition. According to Jones & Christensen (2022), word recognition is the ability to accurately and quickly recognize familiar and unfamiliar words, and language comprehension is the broader understanding of language, including vocabulary knowledge and semantic skills. The rope metaphor suggests that reading proficiency is achieved when both strands are strong and well-developed. Additionally, it emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between word recognition and language comprehension, each strand supporting and reinforcing

the other (p. 147). Several of the district-level and site-level staff I interviewed for my research identified aligning their reading programming to Scarborough's Reading Rope as an important essential condition for reading instruction, as it outlines all the components involved in the complex and nuanced task of teaching a child to read.

Figure 8

Scarborough's Reading Rope
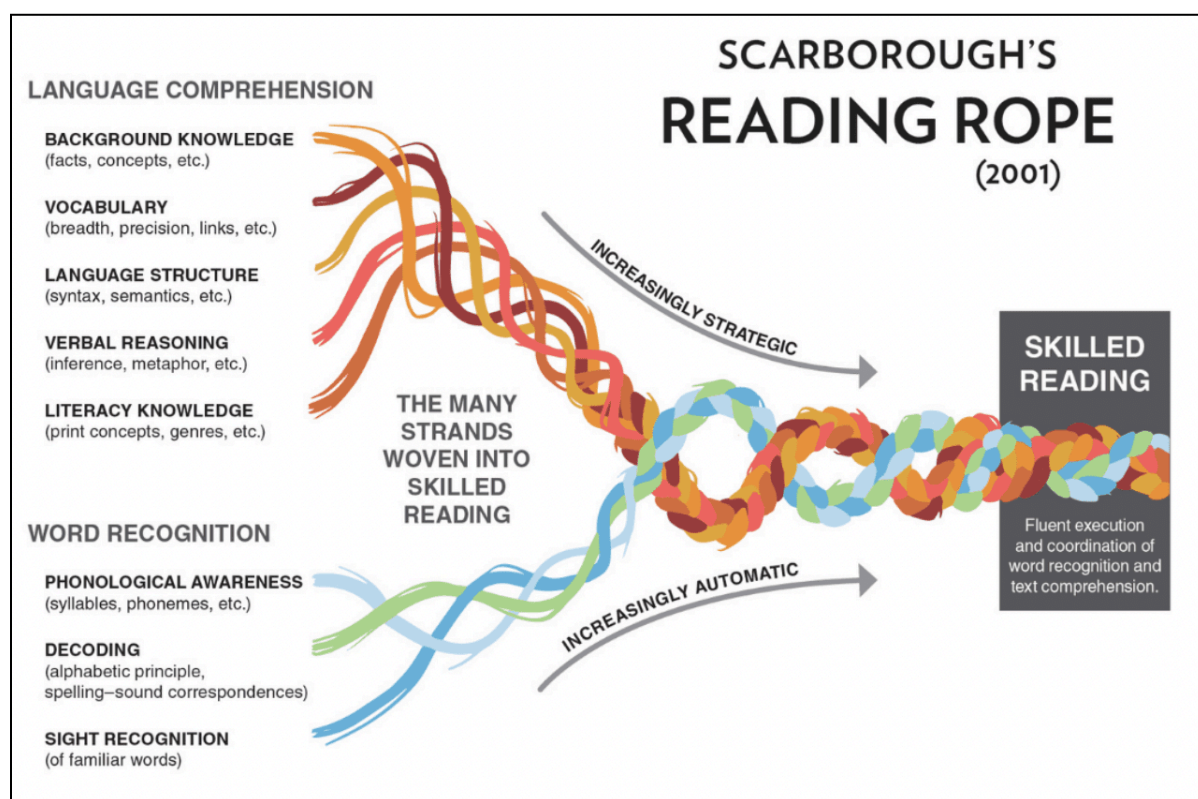
Scarborough, H. S., Neuman, S., & Dickinson, D. (2009). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis) abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. *Approaching difficulties in literacy development: Assessment, pedagogy and programmes*, *10*, 23–38.

Clear and plentiful evidence exists to suggest that an essential condition to grow reading outcomes at the primary grade levels is dependent on programming that is evidence-based and inclusive of the components identified in Scarborough's Reading Rope.

Essential Condition 2: Comprehensive Set of Instructional Materials for Reading Aligned to Evidence-Based Instruction and Inclusive of Content Knowledge

The North, South, and East School District leaders identified access to a comprehensive set of instructional materials as an essential condition that exists in their districts that has supported their work in growing reading outcomes at the 5K–2 level. The adopted instructional materials for reading in each of the three districts are aligned to evidence-based reading instruction to grow phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, background knowledge, oral language development, vocabulary building, instruction in writing, instruction in comprehension, and reading fluency for their students in grades 5K–2. It is interesting to note that none of the three districts adopted instructional materials for reading from the same vendor, and all of the districts are seeing increased reading outcomes at the 5K–2 level.

In addition to the foundational skills for literacy, staff members from each of the three districts identified their instructional materials for reading at the primary grade levels as knowledge-based. In the East School District, Ryan spoke at length about the work of Natalie Wexler (2020) and the importance of a knowledge-based curriculum. According to Wexler, a knowledge-based curriculum is an educational approach that prioritizes the acquisition of foundational background knowledge and vocabulary development for all 5K–2 students across various subject areas, such as history, science, literature, and the arts. This approach contrasts with a skill-based, purely procedural curriculum that focuses primarily on teaching discrete skills and strategies, which Wexler refers to as "content-free." Wexler (2020) argues that early readers need to understand the meaning of words in order to make connections and to comprehend what they are reading and as a vehicle through which critical thinking and analytical skills can be developed. This strategy will grow more active and proficient readers who can analyze and evaluate texts effectively (pp. 24–29). This, too, is a shift in thinking in reading instruction at the early grade levels. In balanced literacy, the prevailing approach to reading instruction was to focus on the skills to grow the reader without regard for the content knowledge. Young readers were encouraged to read and write about their areas of interest while growing their skills as a

reader as opposed to the knowledge-based instructional approach, which highlights the importance of growing background knowledge and vocabulary acquisition for early readers. During my interview with one of the instructional coaches at the East School District, she spoke about the knowledge-based aspects of their current set of instructional materials:

> Our instructional materials spiral in the knowledge portions of the curriculum. It's at different points in history and at different levels of understanding by grade level. As the reader grows, their knowledge base is becoming wider and wider. It is really cool to see how kids love, love, love learning about meaningful topics and things they don't commonly see on YouTube when they're searching on an iPad or reading the same old books.

Sarah, the elementary curriculum coordinator for the South School District, shared similar sentiments:

> Within the instructional materials, there is also a ton of science-based learning. There are magazines which are actually really challenging and very interesting for the kids. In fact, when we were doing our social studies adoption, we were able to pull in what social studies standards we were making sure to teach and cover in the literacy classroom. There's a ton of vocabulary that's developed through the reading resource. We've found that to be really important because we know that if the kids aren't developing and building those vocabulary words when they go to decode them later on, they don't know if they're decoding them correctly, if they've never heard of the word.

In each of the three districts, staff spoke to the importance of a knowledge-based curriculum as an essential condition to which they attributed partial success as they worked to improve reading outcomes at the 5K–2 grade levels. As indicated in chapter 4, there was a notable omission in the data related to ensuring a culturally-responsive curriculum as an important condition to making sure all students are seen and valued in instructional materials and practices.

Essential Condition 3: Small-Group Reading Instruction That Is Responsive

to Student Needs

The third essential condition to grow reading outcomes at the 5K–2 level that emerged

from the data was the presence of small-group instruction as a strategy to meet students' needs

through pre-teaching, re-teaching, and extending the learning related to the identified

essential/focus standard in reading. The leaders of the North, South, and East School Districts

discussed the shift in the overall instructional pedagogy for reading instruction from balanced

literacy to evidence-based reading instruction. Leaders from across the three systems

discussed a greater focus on whole-group instruction for foundational skills and content

instruction in reading at the primary grade levels than had existed when they were using the

balanced-literacy approach. In a balanced-literacy approach, the whole-group instruction was

typically about 8–10 minutes teaching a reading skill or strategy and then independent work

time during which students applied the skill or strategy to their reading while the teacher

conferred with students individually or in small groups. Now, the instructional focus is

whole-group direct instruction on foundational skills and the vocabulary needed to comprehend

the knowledge-based portion of the materials. While small-group instruction exists, it is typically

for a shorter amount of time than when using the balanced-literacy instructional approach.

Each of the three districts identified two parts of the day when small-group and

independent conferring occurs in their current approach to 5K–2 reading instruction. The first

portion of the day during which there is some small-group instruction is during the literacy block.

After whole-class direct instruction, educators meet with small groups or individual students and

pre-teach, re-teach, and/or extend the learning related to the identified essential/focus reading

standard for the unit in which they are working. These are typically considered to be Tier I and

Tier II interventions. The students with whom they meet, the frequency with which they meet,

and the reading standard on which they focus with the small groups or individual students are

determined by classroom assessment data, both formative and summative. Rick, from the North School District, described the small-group instruction in the literacy block by saying:

> Some students are going to see the teacher more often and that's around the essential standards or the most recent assessment where the teacher has seen there is a gap for that particular group of students. They'll continue with that until the student meets proficiency or another support is planned for students.

The allocation of time for whole-group direct instruction and time for small-group and individual instruction was captured in the daily schedules for classroom educators in each of the three school districts. Figure 7 provides an example of how that is captured in the North School District at the kindergarten level.

The second portion of the day during which educators meet with students individually or in small groups is during a designated intervention block. When reviewing the classroom schedules in each of the districts, clear evidence existed of a daily Response to Intervention (RtI) or What I Need (WIN) time at the 5K–2 levels. RtI is an instructional approach used to identify and support students of all abilities to successfully meet or exceed grade-level standards. The RtI process is a multitiered support system that affords students increasingly intense interventions based on their individual needs.

Figure 9 provides an overview of the Tiers (I, II, and III) and related supports for the North School District, which is similar to the supports provided in the East and South School Districts. This document provides district-wide clarity for all staff as to how students are supported instructionally to meet essential standards through multi-level support. This chart was created by the director of teaching and learning for the district in accordance with RtI protocols as identified by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and is reviewed by the director and members of the district leadership team annually. It provides guidance for site leadership teams across the district as they determine which students are eligible for small-group instruction and intervention for additional support to meet grade-level standards.

Figure 9

North School District's RtI Levels of Supports Overview

Tier I Core Program	Access to essential grade-level standards and quality instruction for all students. This includes both school determined behavioral expectations and academic standards.	All students have access to grade-level instruction and support to meet those expectations.	↕
Tier II Supplemental Interventions	Additional support to master essential grade-level standards or prerequisite skills. This includes both school determined behavioral expectations and academic standards.	Students in need of additional support beyond core instruction and differentiation to meet grade-level expectations.	
Tier III Intensive Interventions	Intense remediation in universal skills. This includes both behavioral/SEL skills and universal academic skills.	Students who need intensive remediation on universal skills are supported in intensive Interventions.	

While RtI/WIN is not exclusive to reading instruction, all three district leaders indicated a greater focus on reading during RtI/WIN time than on other content areas in grades 5K–2. In the North, South, and East School Districts, RtI/WIN time is a collaborative effort by grade-level teams inclusive of educators beyond the classroom educators, including teachers of students with disabilities, multilingual teachers, interventionists, and/or support staff. The grade-level teams meet in weekly PLC/PLTs to analyze data and plan instructional interventions for their 5K–2 students in reading. The leaders in the three school districts identified benefits to having an RtI/WIN time built into the academic day, including a systematic approach to supporting struggling readers, preventative and timely support for struggling readers to avoid formal diagnoses, data-based instructional reading strategies designed for students to provide more individualized support, and collaboration among all educators responsible for increasing the reading outcomes for students at the 5K–2 grade levels. When speaking to the data-based, individualized decision-making processes used by PLCs, the district-wide instructional coach from the North School District said:

Some students are going to see the grade-level educators more often during WIN time based on the most recent assessment where the grade-level team has seen there is a gap for a student or group of students on the identified essential reading standards.

One of the instructional coaches from the East School District described the team approach to meeting all students' needs during WIN time due to the collaboration of multiple educators who support students during that time:

During RtI time, the three classroom educators, our five teaching assistants, special ed teachers, and English language arts teachers all go to that grade level's RtI time at the same time every day. We've got eight or nine adults that can split up to support the kids. We may have three informal reading interventions, support for two students who are English learners, and then the team makes all these small groups with everybody else. These five need a reteach on the phonics standard. These four need to focus on reading fluency based on the assessment we just gave. Years ago when I first got here, we had little pockets of informal interventions. It has now become a process where we talk about almost every student, and every student is doing something that they need during the RtI time to grow as a reader.

Similar sentiments were expressed by multiple staff members during their interviews from each of the three districts citing collaborative time (PLC/PLT), classroom Tier I and Tier II interventions during literacy block, and access to Tier II and Tier III interventions through RtI/WIN blocks as essential conditions to support all 5K–2 students in meeting the grade-level essential/focus reading standards.

Essential Condition 4: Access to Robust and Inclusive Classroom Libraries

The fourth and final essential condition that emerged from the data for reading outcomes to improve is students' access to robust and inclusive classroom libraries in the primary grades. The district leaders of the three districts identified well-stocked and diverse classroom libraries as a crucial component to improving reading outcomes at the 5K–2 level. The North, South, and

East School Districts' adopted instructional materials for reading instruction are from three different manufacturers; however, they are similar in the reading materials students utilize to access the reading curriculum. The adopted instructional materials for reading instruction include decodable texts and content-rich texts aligned to social studies and science content as well as some supplemental texts that are hard copy and electronic. Even with the access to texts, core and supplemental, as part of the instructional materials' adoption, the leaders of the North, South, and East School Districts continue to maintain robust and inclusive libraries. The rationale shared by Rick, Tiffany, Sarah, and Ryan for maintaining classroom libraries includes the opportunity for students to access diverse texts that reflect the background, experiences, and identities of the 5K–2 grade readers; an opportunity for 5K–2 students to read books aligned to their interests and passions while building a sense of ownership of their reading habits and encouraging greater engagement in reading; exposure to a broad range of topics and vocabulary as well as different genres and reading styles to develop critical thinking; and cultivating a reading culture in the classroom and a love of reading as an encouragement of lifelong reading habits.

The leaders of the three school districts noted some shifts that have occurred in their classroom libraries as they have migrated away from balanced reading and toward evidence-based reading instruction. Most notably, they commented on the need to increase decodable texts in support of orthographic mapping as opposed to the predictable texts that were utilized when teaching reading using the three-cueing system. The second major shift that was discussed was the shift away from grouping books by level as a strategy to encourage 5K–2 students to read texts according to their identified level, to grouping books by genre, author, content area, etc. With this approach to evidence-based reading, the majority of the students' time is focused on reading grade-level appropriate texts that are provided through the adopted instructional materials, and the time students engage with texts from the classroom library is intended to allow students to explore areas of interests and passion as early readers.

What remains the same about classroom libraries after the shift to evidence-based reading instruction is the robust volume of books that are available for 5K–2 students to access during independent reading time and to take home to read with their parents/caregivers. Similar to balanced-reading libraries, the shelves are stocked with fiction and nonfiction materials at varying levels to meet the individual needs of students in the 5K–2 classrooms. When speaking about how the libraries are used in the East School District, an instructional coach stated, "Ryan and the literacy coaches believed in having classroom libraries stay for free choice and independent reading time to meet students' interest and to grow a love of reading." Tiffany and Sarah spoke to the evolution of their classroom libraries as they adopted their evidence-based reading instructional materials. Prior to the adoption of their materials, they had leveled libraries with a variety of fiction and nonfiction books for 5K–2 students to access. When they adopted their evidence-based materials about seven years ago, they shifted to a strict focus on decodable texts. When speaking about the past two years, an elementary principal from the South School District said:

> Recently we've shifted away from the strict adherence to decodable texts in 5K–2 classroom libraries. We have changed to having all kinds of texts back on the classroom library shelves, not just decodable texts. There are many types of picture books, magazines, graphic novels and some early-reading chapter books that are being built back into the classroom libraries for students to enjoy and explore as they are learning and growing as readers.

It is clear from the interviews in each of the three school districts that the leaders prioritize robust classroom libraries in 5K–2 classrooms to ensure that students have access to a variety of books to encourage their growth as engaged lifelong readers.

In this chapter, I have identified the four essential conditions for reading that emerged in my research of the North, South, and East School Districts. In my sixth and final chapter, I share

the conclusions I have drawn from my research, the limitations of the study, and the implications

for further practice and research.

CHAPTER 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

The previous two chapters explored the leadership actions of district-level directors of

teaching and learning and the essential conditions to improve reading outcomes at the primary

grade levels that emerged from my research in the North, South, and East School Districts. In

chapter 4, I analyzed the leadership actions that emerged in the data I collected through

artifacts, interviews, and observations using Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four Frames: structural,

human resource, political, and symbolic. Fifteen leadership themes and related actions arose

from my analysis of that data. In chapter 5, I analyzed the essential conditions for reading

instruction at the 5K–2 level that emerged from the data gathered from the North, South, and

East School Districts. Four essential conditions emerged from my analysis of the data. The

remainder of this paper is an analysis of the findings that describes their overlap, or lack thereof,

with the existing research outlined in the literature review (chapter 2). I draw conclusions related

to my research questions and explore the implications for practice and propose further research.

Introduction to the Analysis

The intent of my research was to deeply study and uncover the leadership actions and

essential conditions that exist at the primary grade levels in schools that are realizing academic

gains in reading outcomes for grades 5K–2. I utilized a qualitative comparative analysis and

conducted a thorough review of the North, South, and East School Districts with a focus on their

district-level leaders for teaching and learning to uncover the leadership actions that

district-level leaders undertook to establish the essential conditions for reading that existed in

5K–2 classrooms. In the next section, I make sense of the themes that emerged related to the

leadership actions and essential conditions for reading instruction at the primary grade levels in

the North, South and East School Districts to answer my research questions.

Analysis of Themes

My qualitative comparative research study was intended to answer two research questions: (1) What are the essential conditions for literacy achievement at the primary level? and (2) What are the leadership tasks district-level leaders enact to lead for instructional improvement in reading achievement at the primary grade levels? First, I discussed the fifteen themes that arose through the data analysis of my first question when examined through Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four Frames (chapter 4) as compared to the four leadership themes that arose in the literature review (chapter 2). Then I shifted my focus to a discussion of the four essential conditions for reading instruction that emerged through my research (chapter 5) as compared to the themes that emerged in the literature review (chapter 2) in service of answering my secondary research question.

After discussing the themes that emerged from my research as compared to the themes that emerged through my literature review, I now shift to discussing how this data will contribute to the field of research related to leading for increased student outcomes in reading at the primary grade levels.

Leadership Tasks Aligned to Literature Review

In my analysis of the leadership tasks that emerged from the literature review and the data gathered for the purposes of this study, I determined that four leadership actions identified in the literature review had strong overlap with the data gathered from the comparative case study, and one leadership action that emerged from the data I gathered from the school districts had partial overlap with one of the essential conditions in the literature review. The four leadership actions with strong overlap are captured in table 3.

Table 3

Leadership Action Areas of Overlap

Data from Literature Review	Findings from This Study
Leading through a systemic approach to literacy reform.	Establishing district-level structures for coherence.
Establishing and maintaining a data-driven culture around literacy.	Establishing and growing data-based decision-making teams.
Providing continuous professional learning for staff anchored in the district approach to literacy.	Leading professional development with job-embedded coaching.
Prioritizing the allocation of adequate resources for reading instruction.	Allocating significant funds and time for reading.

Clear and plentiful evidence of these leadership actions existed in the literature and emerged from the artifacts, interviews, and observations as leadership tasks employed by district-level leaders who were successful in improving reading outcomes for primary-aged students.

Leadership Tasks Partially Aligned with Literature Review

A theme that emerged from the leadership data gathered from the school districts is that each of the three directors of teaching and learning articulated and communicated expectations for minutes of instruction for reading. This has partial overlap with one of the essential conditions that emerged in the literature review, which was a focus on reading volume with protected instructional time for students to read extensively. While both deal with leaders allocating and protecting time for reading instruction, they approach the allocation and use of the time for different purposes. What emerged from the literature review with respect to time was aimed at creating literacy blocks with a small amount of whole-class direct instruction followed by small-group instruction, while simultaneously allowing for long blocks of time for 5K–2 students to read extensively and independently. This is common practice in a balanced-literacy/workshop approach to teaching reading. What emerged from the data gathered from the school districts was the protection of time in service of creating longer blocks

of time for direct instruction on the foundational skills of reading than in the balanced-literacy model, followed by small-group instruction with some time for students to read independently. The research is clear that 5K–2 students need a significant amount of time to learn to read, and that how that time is organized and the instructional groupings/strategies employed during that block of time differs between the literature review and the school district data.

Leadership Tasks Not Aligned to Literature Review

Ten additional leadership actions emerged from the data gathered from the North, South, and East School Districts that were not represented in the literature review:

- establishing and adhering to continuous improvement processes for reading

- establishing and articulating essential/focus reading standards

- articulating the district expectations for the delivery of reading instruction

- creating and conducting reading fidelity walks

- maintaining a deep knowledge base about reading as district-level leaders

- leading reading in collaboration with others

- communicating with stakeholders about reading

- selecting and adopting evidence-based instructional materials for reading

- building and maintaining a sense of district identity and pride about reading

- managing and leading through staff emotions related to reading

I argue that these ten leadership actions were not represented in the literature for two reasons: (1) The timing of this research coincides with a strong swing of the educational pendulum toward evidence-based reading with the passage of Wisconsin Act 20 and similar legislation across the country, and away from balanced literacy. These ten leadership actions that emerged from the North, South, and East School Districts align more closely to the implementation of evidence-based reading instruction, and the literature review, in part, aligned more closely with the balanced-literacy approach to reading. (2) The existing literature is focused on the leadership actions that site-level leaders should undertake to improve reading outcomes with

very little research specifically focused on what leadership actions district-level leaders for teaching and learning should undertake to improve reading outcomes at the primary grade levels. I have included these ten leadership actions in the guidance document I created for district-level leaders (appendix C) as my contribution to the research community, which is further explained in the next section of this chapter.

Essential Conditions Aligned to Literature Review

In my analysis of the essential conditions for reading instruction that emerged from the literature review and the data gathered for the purposes of this study, I determined that three essential conditions for reading instruction identified in the literature review had strong overlap with the data gathered from the comparative case study, one essential condition that emerged from the data I gathered from the school districts had partial overlap with one of the essential conditions in the literature review, and one essential condition identified in the literature review did not emerge in the data gathered from the North, South, and East School Districts. The three essential conditions for reading instruction with strong overlap are captured in table 4.

Table 4

Essential Conditions for Reading Instruction Areas of Overlap

Data from Literature Review	Findings from This Study
Effective teaching that includes a balance of reading experiences and feedback to the reader on a continuous basis.	Evidence-based reading instruction.
	Small-group instruction for reading responsive to student needs.
Student access to texts that are interesting, culturally relevant, and at their instructional level	Access to robust and inclusive classroom libraries.
Student choice and voice in what they read.	

Essential Conditions Partially Aligned with Literature Review

One of the themes that emerged from the data gathered from the North, South, and East School

Districts as an essential condition for reading instruction is the use of a comprehensive set of

reading instructional materials aligned to evidence-based instruction and content knowledge

that has partial overlap with the theme of student access to texts that are interesting, culturally

relevant, and at their instructional level. I argue that the adoption of a comprehensive set of

instructional materials limits some primary-grade students' ability to access texts that are

interesting and culturally relevant to them. This is especially true for students who are

institutionally marginalized by schools. While all students may be able to access culturally

relevant and interesting texts through their classroom libraries, those texts are supplemental to

the texts included as part of the instructional materials adoption, which have been reported to be

more homogeneous in nature by the users of the instructional materials.

Essential Conditions Not Aligned to Literature Review

One additional essential condition emerged from the literature review that did not

emerge from the data gathered in the North, South, and East School Districts: an opportunity for

primary-grade students to practice listening comprehension. I would argue that this essential

condition should be considered as an important focus for reading instruction at the 5K–2 level

that has been moved from the forefront of district's instructional practice due to the clear focus

on the adoption of evidence-based reading instruction and foundational reading skills. I discuss

this later in this chapter as an implication for further study.

After careful collection, analysis, and reflection, it is clear there are specific leadership

actions for district-level leaders of teaching and learning to undertake, essential conditions for

reading instruction that exist in the literature, and additional themes that have arisen from this

research study that may be acted upon by district leaders in service of improving reading

outcomes at the primary grade levels. In the next section of this chapter, I discuss how I will

utilize the themes gathered in this paper to contribute to the research community and the community of K–12 practitioners through a literacy leaders guidance document.

Contribution of This Study

To address a perceived lack of guidance for improving reading outcomes at the primary grade levels for district-level leaders, my goal in this study was to answer the following two research questions: (1) What are the essential conditions for literacy achievement at the primary level? and (2) What are the leadership tasks that district-level leaders enact to lead for instructional improvement in reading achievement at the primary grade levels?

I argue that well-informed school district leaders of teaching and learning are essential for ensuring that students have access to strong primary-grade literacy instruction. Directors of teaching and learning, in partnership with internal and external stakeholders, shape a vision of academic success in literacy for all students; create essential conditions for reading instruction in which students feel supported as readers; cultivate leadership in others so that principals and other site leaders for literacy feel empowered to realize their schools' reading outcome goals; make district-wide instructional decisions that improve reading instruction; and manage people, data, and processes to foster improvement in reading outcomes through the leadership tasks and actions they undertake. Ultimately, district-level leaders of teaching and learning have a significant impact on students' reading achievement by allocating their time and focus on strategic evidence-based tasks and actions to lead others across the system in improving reading outcomes for all students at the 5K–2 level. Yet, I believe existing research has largely ignored identifying specific guidance for district-level leaders of teaching and learning and have instead focused primarily on site-level staff at the primary grade levels.

I posit that the lack of guidance for district-level leaders of teaching and learning play a role, in part, in the current reading outcomes in the state of Wisconsin and in our country. I assert that my research may contribute to improved reading outcomes at the primary level in two ways: (1) the research I conducted illuminated leadership tasks for district-level leaders of

teaching and learning beyond what exists in the current literature to inform their work in striving to improve reading outcomes at the primary grade levels, and (2) I created a literacy leaders guidance document (appendix C) that captures the research existing in the literature and emerging as findings through this study to be shared with district-level leaders engaged in the work of improving reading outcomes at the primary level as they shift from a balanced-literacy approach to an evidence-based approach to reading instruction.

Limitations

As with any research, this study has limitations. It was designed as a comparative case study of three districts in the state of Wisconsin, which some may argue is a small sample size to determine themes generalizable to district-level leaders across the state due to local control of public school districts in Wisconsin.

I reject this as a limitation and argue that while we have local control in public schools at the school board level, we are all beholden to improving outcomes in reading at the 5K–2 level using the adopted state standards and demonstrating proficiency on the same state assessment. The passage of Wisconsin Act 20 moves all Wisconsin public schools closer to the same expectations for reading by mandating the use of evidence-based reading instruction and prohibiting the use of the three-cueing system. I argue that the research I conducted and the literacy leaders guidance document will be timely and applicable to guide district-level leaders across the state at a time where reading instruction is highly political. I encourage other district-level leaders to review the guidance and determine their own takeaways from the findings and apply them in whatever way they deem fit for their own contexts.

Other limitations in design and execution do exist in my study. I had intended to study districts ranging in size from 3,000 to 10,000 students with diversity in the student body, which I believe would illuminate district-level leadership actions targeted at improving reading outcomes for institutionally marginalized students. Through the nomination process, only one of the twenty-two districts that emerged had a diverse student population. Upon review of that district's

data, the 5K–2 reading outcomes were not growing for all learners. In the three districts I studied, institutionally marginalized students were growing in their reading outcomes, yet I advise that the themes that arose in the research be used with the understanding that further attention may need to be focused on institutionally marginalized students in school districts with greater diversity due to the small percentage of institutionally marginalized students included in this study.

Another limitation to this study was the small grade-level span of 5K–2. I intentionally selected the primary grade levels because it is commonly accepted that success in reading at the early grade levels leads to success in the subsequent grade levels and in additional content areas. While I still hold this position and believe my contribution to the research is timely and has value, district-level leaders should keep in mind that there are likely nuances to growing reading outcomes beyond the foundational reading years at the primary levels for students in grades 3–12.

The final limitation to this study is the timing during which it was conducted, post-pandemic and at the same time as the passage of Wisconsin Act 20. The pandemic years had an impact on reading outcomes at the 5K–2 level, as many young children were attempting to learn to read virtually through at-home learning with less than typical face-to-face instruction during their formative years, resulting in decreased reading outcomes across the state of Wisconsin. The North, South, and East School Districts have bounced back and exceeded their pre-pandemic reading outcomes at the primary level, which made them excellent candidates for the study. Conducting this research in future years may yield a higher number of districts with increasing reading outcomes to study for a broader, more diverse dataset.

Implications for Practice and Further Research

The previous body of research related to leadership tasks to improve reading outcomes has been nearly silent on guidance for leadership tasks that a district-level leader of teaching and learning should undertake to improve reading outcomes at the primary grade levels. In an

effort to fill that gap in the research, this comparative case study uncovered leadership actions to serve as guidance for district-level leaders of teaching and learning as they strive to improve less than desirable reading outcomes.

Implications for Practice

The implications for practice from this study are intended to provide guidance for district-level leaders of teaching and learning to increase reading outcomes at the primary level, similar to the increasing outcomes of the North, South, and East School Districts, in four ways. First, the leadership actions captured in this study and in the literacy leaders guidance document provide practical and relevant leadership tasks for district-level practitioners to conduct a gap analysis of their leadership tasks to improve early reading outcomes and the leadership tasks of the district leaders who have been successful in growing reading outcomes at the 5K–2 level. This gap analysis may yield specific, feasible strategies for practitioners as they determine their leadership priorities. As a longtime practitioner at the district level in public schools, I believe none of the leadership tasks captured within this research are impractical for public schools in the state of Wisconsin.

Second, the public awareness that has resulted from the science of reading research and the passage of Wisconsin Act 20 has catapulted the role of the director of teaching and learning to the forefront of many political and nuanced situations with staff, parents/caregivers, community members, and school boards. This guidance document can provide some direction for district-level leaders of teaching and learning as they navigate the turbulence of the reading wars.

Third, this research lays the foundation for other researchers to build upon as we grapple with an alarming number of young people across our state and nation who cannot read.

Fourth, this research has illuminated a possible gap in the current practice of district-level leaders who have decentered equity in the shift to the expectations of Act 20. Many would argue that the shift to foundational skills at the early grade levels coupled with a

content-based curriculum is an equity strategy, and the early indicators are showing that all students in each of the three districts are making gains at the 5K–2 level in reading outcomes, including the institutionally marginalized learners. Yet, the gains of the institutionally marginalized learners are not growing at a rate fast enough to close the gap between them and their peers. As an equity focused 5K–12 practitioner I have three specific suggestions to recenter equity in service of closing the literacy gap for institutionally marginalized students.

To recenter equity, I suggest that districts conduct an equity audit. An equity audit is a process to identify and address systemic inequities that hinder institutionally marginalized students from becoming literate. An equity audit identifies the disparities in resources, opportunities, and outcomes among student groups and allows district leaders to target interventions more effectively. The results of an equity audit allow district leaders to distribute resources equitably, ensuring that the schools and students who need the most support in reading instruction receive it (Frattura and Capper, 2007). Results of an equity audit may also illuminate areas where teachers and staff need additional training to address specific issues related to equity, inclusion, and culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

I also posit that district leaders must engage staff and diverse community members in the review of the comprehensive set of instructional materials adopted for reading instruction. While each of the three districts studied adopted different sets of instructional materials, each district leader indicated that the universal instructional materials were not inclusive of a diverse community. According to Hammond (2014), inclusivity in instructional materials directly impacts student engagement, motivation, and academic success. Learning materials that reflect the background and experience of diverse students make learning more meaningful and relevant to those students. When students see themselves and their cultures represented in what they are learning, they are more likely to engage with the material. Additionally, inclusive materials help to challenge and dismantle stereotypes and biases by promoting an understanding of different perspectives and fostering a more equitable and just learning environment (pp. 53–55). If the

adopted instructional materials are not representative of a diverse community, they must be revised and/or augmented to ensure that all students see themselves and their culture represented in the materials.

A focus on disaggregated data is essential in recentering equity to ensure that historically marginalized students grow as readers in the primary grade levels. Disaggregated data allows educators and administrators to see differences in performance among various student groups (e.g., by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, English language proficiency, and special education status). This helps in identifying achievement gaps that may be masked by aggregate data, which then allows district and site leaders to create targeted strategic actions to address the needs of their historically marginalized students. Detailed data analysis provides a clearer picture of the effectiveness of educational programs and practices. This information is essential for district-level leaders to make informed decisions about curriculum, instruction, and culturally responsive pedagogy (Frattura and Capper, 2007).

Implications for Further Research

Additional research should be conducted to corroborate and expand upon this study. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the North, South, and East School Districts are fairly homogeneous with similar settings and demographics. Further study inclusive of school districts with greater diversity, varying demographics, and other settings will provide a wider and deeper understanding of the leadership actions for district-level leaders to undertake to improve reading outcomes.

Research examining Wisconsin Act 20 and evidence-based instruction through the lens of our most marginalized learners is warranted. Many would argue that the adoption of Act 20 and the shift to evidence-based practices inclusive of a knowledge-based curriculum is an equity strategy. I partially agree with that statement, and I support that increasing foundational reading skills instruction in the early grades will increase the reading outcomes for our marginalized learners. I argue that it is not enough, however. Our current data does show the

numbers for our institutionally marginalized learners trending in a positive direction, yet they are not growing at a rate fast enough to close the gap between our marginalized learners and their peers. Recent reviews of comprehensive instructional materials that meet the expectations of Act 20 show that the knowledge portions of the curriculum are largely based on a Eurocentric single narrative. The NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools (Khan et al., 2022) recently conducted a study on three widely used sets of ELA instructional materials and found that "these three curricula, which collectively reach millions of students across the country, have deficits that are mostly not being raised in the current public debate about curriculum. Their texts, language, tone and guidance communicate harmful messages to students of all backgrounds, especially Black, Indigenous, students of color, LGBTQIA+ students, and students with disabilities" (p. 55). Impactful research on how to adopt or revise a comprehensive set of instructional materials that is culturally responsive, centering all students' identities and the gifts they bring to the school community, is warranted to ensure that our institutionally marginalized students are able to read proficiently by the end of the second grade.

Additionally, further research should be conducted beyond the primary grade levels. The focus on foundational skills and evidence-based reading are prevalent in grades 5K–2. Further research about the leadership actions for district-level leaders of teaching and learning may uncover additional leadership tasks for grades 3–5 when students shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn."

My final recommendation for further research would be to conduct a similar study a decade from now. The work of district-level leaders of teaching and learning is hyperfocused on evidence-based reading instruction and an intense public outcry to increase reading scores. With a focus on foundational literacy, there may be additional leadership tasks that did not emerge during this study due to timing that I believe are key to reading success, including

promulgating a love for literacy, students having voice and choice in their adopted instructional materials, and teaching children to read deeply and critically as consumers of knowledge.

Conclusions

Throughout the process of conducting my research study, I endeavored to expand the body of research for district-level leaders of teaching and learning who are striving to improve reading outcomes at the primary grade levels. My case study of the North, South, and East School Districts uncovered specific leadership actions to provide guidance to other district leaders in their pursuit of growing 5K–2 reading outcomes for all learners. The leadership actions taken by district-level leaders of teaching and learning ultimately have a significant impact on the staff of their districts and the students' reading achievement, and timely guidance may support more district-level leaders in leading well for the staff and students in their care.

As I started this research, I wanted to identify the essential conditions and leadership actions for impactful reading instruction at the 5K–2 grade levels. The North, South, and East School Districts provided an opportunity for me to gather that data as districts with increasing reading outcomes for students in grades 5K–2 and efficacious district-level leadership for me to study. I believe the practical and timely suggestions to guide district-level leaders in their work to improve reading outcomes will be impactful on the reading lives of students as a foundation to ensuring that all public school students leave K–12 education literate and life ready.

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APPENDIX A: Interview Protocol

I intend to conduct one-on-one interviews with the superintendent, the district-level administrator of teaching and learning, the district literacy coordinator, and site-level staff. The interviews will be semi-structured with a core set of predetermined questions, with the opportunity for follow-up questions to clarify the information provided and for meaning making.

The interviews will be scheduled for one hour and will be conducted virtually. I will ensure that I am in a closed, private space while conducting the virtual interview to ensure confidentiality for the interviewees.

District Name: _____   Date/Time: _____

Name/Position: _____   Location: _____

Opening Script: I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me to share your perceptions and experiences related to the leadership tasks you undertake to improve literacy at the primary grade levels in your district. I have provided you with a copy of the "Consent to Participate in Research" form. Do you have any questions? We will spend about 60 minutes together today, and I will ask you a series of questions during that time. I ask you to think carefully about your responses and to refrain from disclosing any highly sensitive information and/or reporting on things that you have not seen or directly experienced. Please take care not to identify any individuals in your responses. With your permission, I plan to record this virtual interview so I do not miss any of the information you share. May I have your permission to do so? Do you have any questions before we begin? Let's begin if you do not have any further questions. (Begin recording if permission is granted by the participant.)

Introduction on the Recording: I am interviewing (name, position) at (location) on (date) and the time is (time).

Personal Background Questions:
1. Please tell me about your current position. How long have you been doing this work, and what brought you to this role?
2. Have you held other roles in this district or in other districts? If yes, please tell me about those roles.

Introduction of the Research Questions: This research study is seeking to answer specific questions regarding the conditions that are essential in order for reading achievement to occur at the primary grade levels and the leadership tasks that district-level leaders undertake to ensure primary-aged students are growing as readers. The questions throughout the interview are intended to understand your experience as it relates to those questions.

1. Please tell me about some of the central features of your literacy programming for primary-aged students.
2. How did the central features of your program get built over time?
3. Who were the primary actors in building and sustaining your literacy programming?
4. What challenges and obstacles have you met along the way?
5. How do you as a district-level leader ensure that all educators are well equipped to meet the needs of their students in grades 5K–2 as readers?
6. What are the strategic leadership actions you employ to ensure that the essential elements of your literacy programming exist in all sites K–2?
7. How do you assess the impact and effectiveness of your leadership actions?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions:
1. Please tell me more about your district literacy plan.
   a. How was it developed?
   b. How do you ensure it is carried out across the district?
2. How is your literacy curriculum developed?
   a. Who was involved?
   b. How do you ensure it is implemented to fidelity across the K–2 system?

3. How would you describe the district's instructional framework?
    a. How was it selected and/or developed?
    b. How do you ensure consistency within the implementation of the instructional framework?

Post-Interview Statement: Thank you for participating in my research study. I greatly appreciate you taking the time to meet with me to share your experiences.

APPENDIX B: Observation Protocol / Field Notes

I intend to conduct one observation of the district-level administrator responsible for teaching and learning while they lead activities with the purpose of improving reading achievement at the K–2 level.

I anticipate that the activities I will observe may include a curriculum meeting, a leadership meeting, a literacy professional development session, a board of education meeting, a literacy study team meeting, a reading specialist meeting, etc.

While conducting my research, I intend to capture my observations in three categories: descriptions of the observation environment (setting, people, activities, etc.), direct quotations, and my reflections and comments as an observer. With the participants' permission, I will audio record the meetings to ensure that I capture details and direct quotes accurately.

Observation Protocol

District Name: _____   Date/Time: _____

Event/Activity: _____   Location: _____

Types of Sources Examined:
- Resources/materials present
- Multimedia visual displays
- Handouts/artifacts
- Interpersonal interactions
- Intrapersonal observations
- Other observations that become apparent during the meeting

Names and Roles of Meeting Participants:

Name	Role

Setting

Activity	Leadership Actions Observed

Quotes

My Reflections/Notes

APPENDIX C: District-Wide Leadership for Literacy:
A Guidance Document for District-Level Leaders Striving
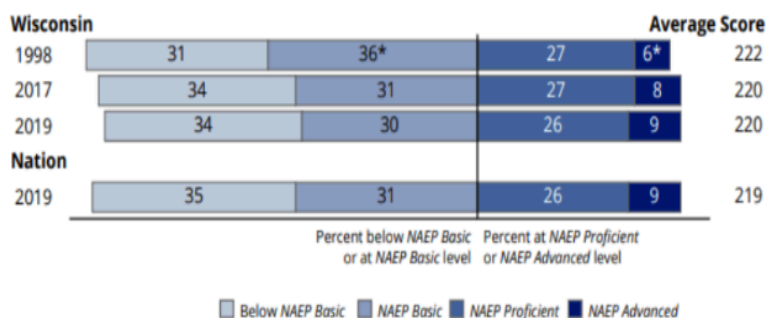**to Improve Reading Outcomes for Grades 5K–2**

District-Wide Leadership for Literacy:
A Guidance Document for District-Level Leaders Striving
to Improve Reading Outcomes for Grades 5K–2

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Spring 2024

Introduction

In the state of Wisconsin and across the nation, we must improve our literacy rates for all learners. Recent Forward and NAEP data indicate that approximately one in three students is a proficient reader by the end of third grade and fourth grade, respectively. The data are even more concerning for institutionally marginalized students.

NAEP Achievement- Level Percentages and Average Score Results

Wisconsin					Average Score
1998	31	36*	27	6*	222
2017	34	31	27	8	220
2019	34	30	26	9	220
Nation					
2019	35	31	26	9	219

Percent below *NAEP Basic* or at *NAEP Basic* level   Percent at *NAEP Proficient* or *NAEP Advanced* level

☐ Below *NAEP Basic* ☐ *NAEP Basic* ■ *NAEP Proficient* ■ *NAEP Advanced*

* Significantly different ($p < .05$) from state's results in 2019. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers.
NOTE: NAEP achievement levels are to be used on a trial basis and should be interpreted and used with caution. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

Note. 2019 State Reading Results, Fourth Grade, Student Groups. From The Nation's Report Card, by National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022, (https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ltt/?age=9)

NAEP Results for Student Groups in 2019

Reporting Groups	Percentage of students	Avg. score	Percentage at or above *NAEP* Basic	Proficient	Percentage at *NAEP* Advanced
Race/Ethnicity					
White	67	227	73	42	11
Black	10	188	31	11	1
Hispanic	11	208	53	23	5
Asian	5	223	64	35	14
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	198	44	19	3
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	#	‡	‡	‡	‡
Two or more races	5	219	67	36	9
Gender					
Male	51	216	62	32	8
Female	49	224	70	39	10
National School Lunch Program					
Eligible	43	204	49	20	3
Not eligible	56	233	79	48	14

Rounds to zero.
‡ Reporting standards not met.
NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding, and because the "Information not available" category for the National School Lunch Program, which provides free/reduced-price lunches, is not displayed. Black includes African American and Hispanic includes Latino. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin.

Note. 2019 State Reading Results, Fourth Grade, Student Groups. From The Nation's Report Card, by National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022, (https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ltt/?age=9)

District-level leaders of teaching and learning play an integral role in improving reading outcomes for all students. In partnership with internal and external stakeholders, district-level directors of teaching and learning:

- shape a vision of academic success in literacy for all students
- create essential conditions for reading instruction in which students feel supported as readers
- cultivate leadership in others so that principals and other site leaders for literacy feel empowered to realize their schools' reading outcome goals
- make district-wide instructional decisions that improve reading instruction
- manage people, data, and processes to foster improvement in reading outcomes

Ultimately, district-level directors of teaching and learning have a significant impact on students' reading achievement by devoting their time to strategic, evidence-based tasks and actions to lead educators across the system in improving reading outcomes for all students at the 5K–2 level. The guidance captured in this document is intended to support district-level leaders of teaching and learning as they strive to improve district-wide reading outcomes at the 5K–2 grade levels. The eighteen leadership actions captured here are the result of a doctoral study focusing on the leadership actions of district-level leaders of teaching and learning in three Wisconsin school districts that are successfully growing reading outcomes for all learners at the 5K–2 level. These actions are shared with the intention of supporting educational leaders across the state of Wisconsin in improving reading outcomes for all learners in grades 5K–2.

Leadership Action 1: Maintain a deep knowledge base about evidence-based reading instruction as a district-level leader of teaching and learning.

District-level leaders of teaching and learning must make informed decisions about curriculum, instructional practices, professional development, and resource allocation. A deep understanding of evidence-based reading instruction allows district-level leaders to evaluate various approaches and interventions and make decisions that are grounded in research and

best practices. This ensures that district initiatives are aligned with the most effective strategies for improving reading outcomes.

Additionally, a strong knowledge base in evidence-based reading instruction enables leaders to offer meaningful support, resources, and professional development opportunities to educators. By sharing research-based strategies and instructional techniques, district-level leaders can support educators to enhance their effectiveness in teaching reading and in improving reading outcomes at the primary grade levels.

Most importantly, district-level leaders of teaching and learning have a responsibility to ensure that all students have access to high-quality reading instruction that meets their diverse needs. A strong knowledge base in evidence-based practices enables district leaders of teaching and learning to identify and address disparities in access to effective instruction and resources. By advocating for equitable policies and interventions and supporting the implementation of research-backed strategies, leaders can promote improved reading outcomes for all students.

Leadership Action 2: Establish district-level structures for districtwide coherence while navigating the shift from balanced-literacy instruction to evidence-based reading instruction.

Establishing and clearly communicating district-wide structures is an important leadership task due to the loosely coupled nature of 5K–12 systems with multiple sites and with multiple leaders at each site responsible for supporting staff in improving reading outcomes. A lack of clear direction and established structures from district-level leaders of teaching and learning may allow for sites to drift from the district approach to reading instruction, resulting in a failure to deliver a guaranteed and viable curriculum to all students, ultimately resulting in stagnant and/or declining reading outcomes in grades 5K–2. Establishing structures for curriculum committees, decision-making processes, communication protocols/frequency, professional development

plans, and a district-wide timeline for the adoption/implementation of evidence-based reading

materials and instructional practices will increase the likelihood of district-wide coherence and

improved reading outcomes at the 5K–2 level.

Leadership Action 3: Allocate significant time and funding for reading at the primary grades.

The primary grades are a critical period for students to develop foundational reading skills,

including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Investing

resources in reading instruction in grades 5K–2 sets a strong foundation for students' future

academic success. By prioritizing reading instruction in the primary grades, district leaders of

teaching and learning can ensure that students have the necessary skills to become proficient

readers as they progress through school. Early intervention is key to preventing reading

difficulties and addressing literacy gaps. By allocating time and funding for reading instruction in

grades 5K–2, district leaders can provide targeted support to students who may be at risk of

falling behind in reading.

Early identification and intervention can help mitigate reading difficulties before they become

more challenging to address in later grades. Allocating resources for reading instruction in the

primary grades helps ensure equity and access for all students regardless of background or

learning needs.

Leadership Action 4: Lead instructional improvements for reading in collaboration with others, internally and externally.

District-level directors of teaching and learning should collaborate with internal district-level

directors of student services, multilingual learners, and equity to ensure that the instructional

programming for reading is inclusive of all students' needs. Beyond collaboration with fellow

directors, collaboration with educators, instructional coaches, and curriculum specialists allows

district leaders to tap into a diverse range of expertise and perspectives. By working together,

leaders can draw on the knowledge and insights of those directly involved in reading instruction

to develop more effective strategies and initiatives.

Improving reading instruction in the state of Wisconsin requires addressing nuanced, complex

challenges that extend beyond the boundaries of individual schools or districts. Collaboration

with external partners, such as CESAs, universities, reading-focused organizations, and other

school districts, can provide access to different perspectives, resources, and solutions to ensure

that all students are able to read proficiently by the end of second grade. By collaborating with

external stakeholders, district leaders can leverage collective expertise and resources to

address systemic issues and drive meaningful change in reading instruction.

Leadership Action 5: Anticipate, manage, and lead through staff emotions related to shifts in reading instructional practices and materials.

Change, especially significant shifts in reading instructional practices and materials at the

primary grade levels, can evoke a range of emotions among staff members, including anxiety,

frustration, resistance, and a sense of loss as Wisconsin districts shift away from balanced

literacy and the three-cueing system for reading instruction to evidence-based reading

instruction. By anticipating and acknowledging these emotions, leaders can proactively address

concerns, problem-solve with staff, and provide the necessary professional development and

support to help educators at the primary grades navigate the shift to evidence-based reading

instruction more effectively. This can help mitigate resistance to change, promote a smooth

implementation process, and support staff well-being.

Leadership Action 6: Communicate with internal and external stakeholders about reading instruction for grades 5K–2.

District-level leaders have a responsibility to communicate openly and transparently with internal stakeholders, including educators, administrators, and support staff, about reading instruction in the primary grades and the district's plan to increase reading outcomes for all learners. By clearly articulating expectations and providing updates on reading instruction in grades 5K–2, district-level leaders of teaching and learning can ensure that educators are working collaboratively toward improved reading outcomes for grades 5K–2 district-wide through coherence and consistency in reading instruction across schools and classrooms.

District leaders of teaching and learning must also communicate with external stakeholders, including parents/caregivers, families, and community members, about reading instruction in grades 5K–2. Effective communication helps engage parents and families in their children's education, providing them with information about instructional approaches, strategies for supporting reading at home, and opportunities for involvement in school activities related to literacy. This is especially important at this time due to the fact that concerns about reading instruction and less than optimal reading outcomes for students are mainstream news, causing external stakeholders concern across the state and nation.

Leadership Action 7: Build and/or maintain a sense of district identity and pride about reading instruction and outcomes.

A strong sense of district identity and pride about reading outcomes creates a positive culture within the school community. When educators, students, and families feel connected to the district and its mission to improve reading outcomes for all students, they are more likely to feel motivated, engaged, and invested in the success of reading instruction initiatives and the district overall.

When district staff feel connected to a shared vision for reading instruction and purpose, they are more likely to collaborate effectively and work together to support student success in reading. This collaboration can lead to a more cohesive and coordinated approach to reading

instruction across the district, a positive morale, and overall well-being of the staff at a time that is challenging to attract and retain high quality teachers.

Leadership Action 8: Establish and adhere to continuous improvement processes for reading through a curriculum renewal and design plan process.

Establishing and adhering to a curriculum renewal and design plan process can significantly contribute to improving reading outcomes in schools in several ways, including ensuring a strong alignment with Wisconsin reading standards to articulate reading curriculum that covers the necessary content and skills expected at each grade level, engaging staff in the study of the latest evidence-based practices for reading instruction, identifying mechanisms and assessments for progress monitoring to allow for timely adjustments to instruction, planning opportunities for professional development for educators to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively implement the reading curriculum, and engaging student and parent voice in the curriculum to ensure that it is engaging and relevant and will capture students' interest and motivation.

Leadership Action 9: Identifying and articulating essential/focus reading standards.

Identifying essential standards in a reading curriculum can significantly increase student outcomes in several key ways, including providing focus and clarity on the specific reading skills and knowledge that are most critical for successful reading; creating a clear roadmap for educators to focus their valuable instructional time effectively; supporting targeted instruction to ensure that students engage in instruction needed to master critical reading skills; ensuring consistency in reading instruction across classrooms, schools, and districts to prevent gaps and redundancies in students' learning experiences; serving as the foundation for designing assessments that accurately measure student progress and mastery; fostering the opportunity for vertical articulation of standards, ensuring continuity and coherence in students' learning

progression across grade levels; and allocating resources strategically to support students'
long-term academic growth.

Leadership Action 10: Select and adopt instructional materials for reading instruction aligned with Wisconsin Act 20.

Wisconsin Act 20 was signed into law by Governor Tony Evers in July of 2023. Act 20 states that all Wisconsin schools are required to provide science-based early literacy instruction in both universal and intervention settings. *Science-based early literacy instruction* is defined as the following: Instruction that is systematic and explicit and that consists of all of the following: phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, building background knowledge, oral language development, vocabulary building, instruction in writing, instruction in comprehension, and reading fluency. *Phonics* is defined as the study of the relationships between sounds and words; this includes alphabetic principle, decoding, orthographic knowledge, encoding, and fluency (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, March 19, 2024).

While districts are not required to adopt new instructional materials, they are compelled to use instructional materials aligned to science-based early literacy and are prohibited from using materials utilizing the three-cueing reading instructional model. District-level leaders of teaching and learning should assess current instructional materials and teaching methods to ensure alignment with Wisconsin Act 20 and adopt new materials if current materials do not align.

Leadership Action 11: Provide 5K–2 students access to robust and inclusive classroom libraries.

Classroom libraries offer students a wide variety of books and reading materials that cater to their diverse interests, abilities, and reading levels. By having access to a diverse selection of books, students are more likely to find reading materials that engage and motivate them, fostering a love for reading and promoting literacy development.

Classroom libraries provide students with opportunities for independent reading, which is essential for building fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary skills. When students have access to a variety of books that interest them, they are more likely to engage in independent reading both in and out of the classroom. Independent reading promotes self-directed learning and helps students develop a lifelong habit of reading.

Classroom libraries should reflect the diversity of students' backgrounds, experiences, and identities. By providing inclusive reading materials that represent a variety of cultures and perspectives, equity and inclusivity are promoted in the 5K–2 classroom. All students should have access to books that reflect their own identities and experiences, as well as books that allow them to learn about and empathize with others.

Leadership Action 12: Articulate and communicate the district expectations for the delivery of reading instruction in grades 5K–2.

Clearly defined district expectations ensure consistency in reading instruction across all classrooms and schools within the district. When educators understand what is expected of them in terms of instructional practices, curriculum, and assessment, they can align their teaching approaches accordingly. Additionally, articulating district expectations creates a system of accountability for both educators and administrators. Educators understand the standards and practices they are expected to uphold in their instructional delivery, while administrators have clear criteria against which they can assess instructional effectiveness. Ultimately, the primary goal of articulating district expectations for reading instruction is to improve student achievement. When teachers receive consistent guidance and support in implementing effective instructional practices, students are more likely to experience academic success. Clear district expectations help create a cohesive and supportive learning environment that fosters the development of strong reading skills among all students.

Leadership Action 13: Articulate and communicate expectations for minutes of reading instruction for grades 5K–2.

Articulating expectations for minutes of reading instruction for grades 5K–2 provides educators with a clear understanding of the minimum amount of time that should be dedicated to reading instruction each day. Consistent expectations ensure that all elementary schools and 5K–2 classrooms district-wide are aligned in terms of instructional time for reading, promoting a guaranteed and viable curriculum and instructional reading experience as a strategy to increase the likelihood of improved reading outcomes.

Leadership Action 14: Ensure delivery of small-group reading instruction for 5K–2 students that is data-informed and responsive to student needs.

Ensuring the delivery of small-group reading instruction for 5K–2 students that is data-informed and responsive to student needs promotes targeted instruction, scaffolding, continuous progress monitoring, efficient use of instructional time, and responsiveness to student progress. By utilizing data to inform instruction and adapting their teaching to meet students' needs, educators can narrow the opportunity gap and support the development of strong reading skills and improved reading outcomes for all 5K–2 students.

Leadership Action 15: Plan and provide professional development and job-embedded coaching for evidence-based reading instructional practices, the use of evidence-based instructional materials, and collaborative data-based decision-making teams for grades 5K–2.

Professional development and job-embedded coaching help educators understand and implement evidence-based reading instructional practices effectively. By providing training on evidence-based instructional strategies for reading and the use of evidence-based instructional materials, educators can develop the knowledge and skills needed to deliver high-quality reading instruction that meets the needs of students in grades 5K–2 to increase reading outcomes.

Data-based decision-making teams play a critical role in improving 5K–2 reading outcomes by identifying student needs, targeting scaffolded instructional support, monitoring progress, informing instructional planning, and promoting collaboration among 5K–2 staff as they work with one another to increase reading outcomes. Professional development and job-embedded coaching in data-based decision-making equips 5K–2 educators to improve instruction and to ensure that all students receive the support they need to become proficient readers by the end of second grade.

Leadership Action 16: Establish and grow site-level / grade-level data-based decision-making teams focused on reading.

Establishing and growing site-level/grade-level data-based decision-making teams focused on reading promotes targeted instruction, responsive intervention, evidence-based practices, professional collaboration, accountability, transparency, and efficient resource allocation. By regularly reviewing data and setting goals for improvement, educators hold themselves and their teammates accountable for student outcomes and demonstrate transparency in their decision-making processes. This fosters a culture of accountability within the school community and encourages teams to work collaboratively toward shared goals. By leveraging data to inform instructional decision-making, educators can improve reading outcomes for all students and create a supportive learning environment where every student has the opportunity to succeed.

Leadership Action 17: Create and conduct reading fidelity walks.

Reading fidelity walks provide a structured process for monitoring the implementation of reading instruction according to established district standards and expectations. By conducting regular fidelity walks, educators can ensure that instructional practices align with research-based strategies and curriculum. This promotes consistency and high-quality instruction across classrooms, grade levels, and schools district-wide.

Additionally, fidelity walks offer opportunities for ongoing professional development and learning.

Educators can observe effective instructional practices in action during the walks, learn from

their colleagues, and exchange ideas for improving reading instruction. Fidelity walks also

provide a platform for constructive feedback and coaching, helping teachers refine their

instructional techniques and enhance their effectiveness in the classroom.

Finally, fidelity walks ensure that reading instruction aligns with the goals and expectations of

the school or district. By monitoring fidelity to established standards and expectations,

educators can ensure that instructional practices support broader educational objectives, such

as improving reading outcomes and closing opportunity gaps.

Leadership Action 18: Recenter equity to close the opportunity gap for 5K–2 students in reading.

Conduct an equity audit to identify and address systemic inequities that hinder institutionally

marginalized students from becoming literate. An equity audit identifies the disparities in

resources, opportunities, and outcomes among student groups, allowing district leaders to

target interventions more effectively. The results of an equity audit allow district leaders to

distribute resources equitably, ensuring that the schools and students who need the most

support in reading instruction receive it (Frattura and Capper, 2007). Results of an equity audit

may also illuminate areas where teachers and staff need additional training to address specific

issues related to equity, inclusion, and culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Engage staff and diverse community members in the review of the comprehensive set of

instructional materials adopted for reading instruction. According to Hammond (2014), inclusivity

in instructional materials directly impacts student engagement, motivation, and academic

success. Learning materials that reflect the background and experience of diverse students

make learning more meaningful and relevant to them. When students see themselves and their

cultures represented in what they are learning, they are more likely to engage with the material. Additionally, inclusive materials help to challenge and dismantle stereotypes and biases by promoting an understanding of different perspectives and fostering a more equitable and just learning environment (pp. 53–55). If the adopted instructional materials are not representative of a diverse community, they must be revised and/or augmented to ensure that all students see themselves and their cultures represented in the materials.

Focus on disaggregated data to ensure that historically marginalized students grow as readers in the primary grade levels. Disaggregated data allows educators and administrators to see differences in performance among various student groups (e.g., by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, English language proficiency, and special education status). This helps in identifying achievement gaps that may be masked by aggregate data, which then allows district and site leaders to create targeted strategic actions to address the needs of their historically marginalized students. Detailed data analysis provides a clearer picture of the effectiveness of educational programs and practices. This information is essential for district-level leaders to make informed decisions about curriculum, instruction, and culturally responsive pedagogy (Frattura and Capper, 2007).

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