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Institute of Education Sciences

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Summary

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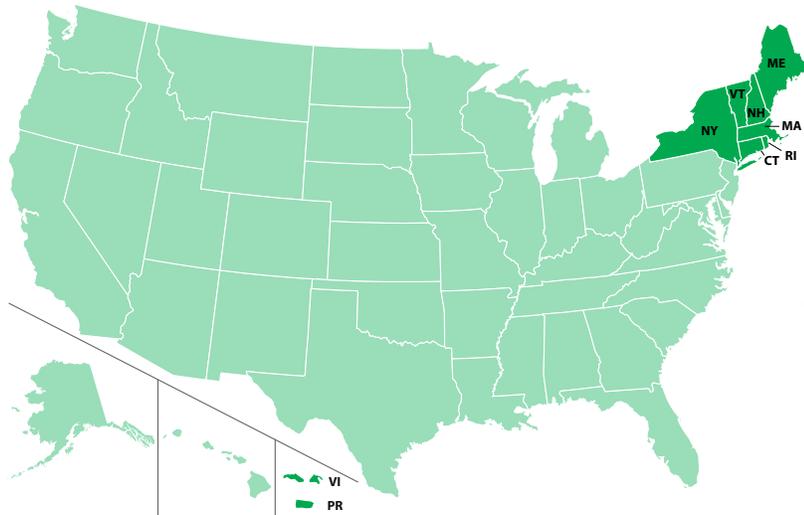
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Five states' efforts to improve adolescent literacy

This report describes efforts by five states—Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, New Jersey, and Rhode Island—to improve adolescent literacy. Highlighting common challenges and lessons, the report examines how each state has engaged key stakeholders, set rigorous goals and standards, aligned resources to support adolescent literacy goals, built educator capacity, and used data to measure progress.

Responding to questions from state education agency staff members and policymakers, the report describes what each state has done to promote effective adolescent literacy practices in schools and districts. The researchers collected information from policy documents and through interviews with key staff members at state education agencies.

Five state case studies describe how state educators and policymakers tailored their policy strategies to the needs of each state.

- Alabama cultivated community support to develop and fund a pilot K–12 literacy program, used investments in K–3 literacy to sustain a commitment to literacy across grades K–12, reformulated its program to better address adolescent needs, and built school instruction capacity.
- Florida passed laws to spur change and to support program expansion, built teacher capacity with state-level training and endorsement, and enlisted parents to promote literacy at home.
- Kentucky collaborated with higher education institutions, took advantage of state, federal, and private funds, and changed systems to support adolescent literacy.
- New Jersey—which piloted and was gradually scaling up its program—provided state funds and professional development and used teacher-to-teacher communication to influence teachers' attitudes toward adolescent literacy.
- Rhode Island engaged stakeholders outside the state government and state education agency to make adolescent literacy a priority, ensured consistent messages by articulating the alignments among various policies and regulations, formed a clear research-based vision for adolescent literacy instruction, phased in parts of its policy, and integrated literacy improvement into state institutions.

Following the state case studies, a cross-state analysis examines how each state applied five types of strategies for improving adolescent

literacy. The five strategies—also used as criteria for selecting states for this study—were applied with considerable variation across the five states. The cross-state analysis also relates what officials at the five state education agencies learned about framing state policies to support adolescent literacy and about putting such policies into practice.

The report does not compare the merits of the five states' different approaches. Instead, it describes policies crafted by different states. Those policies reflect a range of challenges faced by state-level educators working to support struggling adolescent readers.

The report highlights common challenges and insights into how states used the five types of strategy to support their adolescent literacy improvement policies:

- *Engaging key stakeholders to make adolescent literacy a priority.* Alabama, Kentucky, New Jersey, and Rhode Island reported efforts to inform adolescent literacy policies using stakeholder expertise and feedback. Florida used family literacy programs to develop parent and community capacity and to make literacy a priority for more stakeholders.
- *Setting rigorous state literacy goals and standards, with other state policies aligned to support them.* Interviewees in all five states reported that rigorous standards for literacy had been developed or were in development. Interviewees in Alabama and Rhode Island described how their states ensured collaboration among state education agency departments. And Florida, Kentucky, and Rhode Island aligned adolescent literacy initiatives with early literacy initiatives.
- *Aligning resources to support adolescent literacy goals.* State policies take local context into account when aligning resources to promote adolescent literacy. Each state had at least one state education agency staff member devoted to adolescent literacy, and each state required that schools provide reading interventions to struggling readers. The five states had various ways to fund adolescent literacy improvement. Funding was a special challenge for the three states lacking statewide initiatives.
- *Building educator capacity to support adolescent literacy programs at state, school, and classroom levels.* Leaders in all five states described professional development and new staff hires as key to supporting state adolescent literacy programs. State education agencies in Florida and Kentucky partnered with colleges and universities to build the agencies' capacity. All five states used a combination of direct training for teachers and training for coaches, usually with a focus on content-area literacy instruction and intervention with struggling readers. All used school-based coaches, and state-based coaches or literacy specialists were critical to professional development in all states but Florida. Yet the five states assigned different functions to such coaches and specialists, reflecting important differences among their literacy improvement strategies. All states had systems for two-way communication between reading coaches or specialists and state-level staff.

- *Measuring progress and using data to make decisions and provide oversight.*

All five states reported a commitment to using data for decisionmaking. All viewed assessment as an important element of their policies—yet none was satisfied with the assessments available. Respondents described their efforts, and the efforts of schools, to use assessments formatively and collectively to push for better student literacy outcomes. They reported the use of screening, diagnostic, and assessment data to measure progress, inform placement,

and support instruction, although they have differing guidelines for doing so. And they described their engagement in various oversight activities: communicating with reading coaches, collecting data on the numbers of students receiving interventions, collecting data from assessments, and monitoring school compliance with certain demands. Still, the interviewees described a need for greater oversight capacity.

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