

Leader Strategies

I Literacy Leadership

RECOMMENDATION 1

Screen all students for potential reading problems at the beginning of the year and again in the middle of the year.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Provide time for differentiated reading instruction for all students based on assessments of students' current reading level.

Leadership Area	Level of Evidence
Literacy	 Moderate

RECOMMENDATION 1

Screen all students for potential reading problems at the beginning of the year and again in the middle of the year.

School leaders should implement universal reading screening for all students in kindergarten through grade 2 at the beginning of the school year and again mid-year. This early identification process is essential for recognizing students who may be at risk for reading difficulties and ensuring they receive timely, targeted support. To maximize effectiveness, schools should use screening tools that are efficient, reliable, and reasonably valid.

- **Efficient:** An efficient screening tool is quick to administer and score, minimizing instructional disruption while providing timely insights into students' reading abilities. Efficiency ensures that assessments can be integrated seamlessly into the school schedule without overburdening staff or students.
- **Reliable:** A reliable screening measure yields consistent results across different administrations and evaluators. This consistency is crucial for accurately tracking student progress and making informed decisions about instructional needs.
- **Valid:** A valid screening tool accurately measures the specific reading skills it intends to assess, such as phonemic awareness or decoding. Validity ensures the tool effectively identifies students at risk for reading difficulties, allowing for appropriate interventions.

For students flagged as at risk, principals should ensure that their progress in reading and related skills is monitored regularly, ideally on a monthly or weekly basis, to determine whether interventions are effective or need to be adjusted. This systematic approach supports early intervention and helps build a strong foundation for reading success across the school.

Strategies

1. Create a building-level team to facilitate the implementation of universal screening and progress monitoring.

To effectively implement universal screening and progress monitoring within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), school leaders should establish a dedicated building-level implementation team. This team, whether termed a MTSS Team or a Literacy Leadership Team (LLT), is responsible for leading, coordinating, and sustaining implementation efforts across both the logistical and instructional dimensions.

The team should include a diverse representation of staff, such as administrators, coaches, interventionists, general and special educators, and representatives from across grade levels and departments. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities are critical to ensure shared accountability, promote effective collaboration, and drive consistent decision-making practices across the school.

Key responsibilities of the team include:

- **Logistical Coordination:** Assigning staff for assessment administration, developing testing schedules, and ensuring all students, including those needing make-up sessions, complete screenings in a timely and reliable manner. See Figure 1 below.
- **Data-Driven Decision-Making:** Establishing and applying consistent, research-based criteria for identifying students who need tiered interventions and determining when students have made sufficient progress to exit support. For schools new to this process, it is advisable to use benchmark data from national databases provided by publishers rather than creating custom criteria prematurely.
- **Instructional Leadership:** Promoting the use of data to inform instructional planning, integrating MTSS practices into the school’s broader literacy goals, and ensuring that universal screening and progress monitoring are embedded within a coherent, continuous improvement cycle.
- **Stakeholder Engagement and Alignment:** Supporting both vertical and horizontal alignment by working with grade-level and intervention teams and establishing regular feedback loops with stakeholders including students, families, and community partners.

A strong implementation team ensures that universal screening and progress monitoring are not isolated tasks, but essential components of a schoolwide strategy for equitable and effective literacy instruction.

Figure 1. Sample Assessment Schedule Template

Universal Screening & Progress Monitoring Schedule Template

School Name:	MTSS/LLT Team Members:
Academic Year:	Site Administrator:

Assessment Windows Overview

Assessment Type	Window Dates	Target Students	Notes
Fall Universal Screening	Sept 3 – Sept 13, 2025	All students (Grades K–5)	Baseline data collection
Winter Universal Screening	Jan 6 – Jan 17, 2026	All students	Mid-year checkpoint
Spring Universal Screening	May 5 – May 16, 2026	All students	End-of-year growth measurement

Assessment Type	Window Dates	Target Students	Notes
Progress Monitoring (Tier 2)	Every 2 weeks, starting Sept 23	Identified Tier 2 students	Use grade-appropriate CBM or similar tools
Progress Monitoring (Tier 3)	Weekly, starting Sept 16	Identified Tier 3 students	High-frequency, targeted assessments

Staffing & Roles Matrix

Role	Name	Assigned Grades/Groups	Responsibilities
Team Lead/Testing Coordinator	[Name]	All grades	Oversee logistics and schedule adherence
Data Manager	[Name]	All grades	Input and organize assessment data
Screener Admin (K–1)	[Name]	K–1	Conduct early literacy screeners
Screener Admin (2–3)	[Name]	Grades 2–3	Conduct reading fluency and comprehension
Screener Admin (4–5)	[Name]	Grades 4–5	Conduct reading fluency and comprehension
Make-Up Testing Coordinator	[Name]	All grades	Monitor absentees and reschedule assessments
Progress Monitoring Lead	[Name]	Tier 2 & 3 students	Oversee progress monitoring fidelity

Weekly Testing Block Template (Progress Monitoring)

Day	Time Block	Tier Level	Staff Assigned	Notes
Monday	8:00–10:00 AM	Tier 3	[Staff Names]	Individual assessments
Wednesday	8:30–10:30 AM	Tier 2	[Staff Names]	Small group data collection
Friday	1:00–2:30 PM	Make-ups	[Make-Up Coordinator]	Absentees from earlier rounds

Feedback & Review Protocol

Meeting Type	Frequency	Participants	Focus Areas
LLT / MTSS Team Meeting	Bi-weekly	Core team & interventionists	Review screening/progress data; adjust groupings
Grade-Level Check-Ins	Monthly	Teachers & LLT rep	Discuss student needs and instructional implications
Family Communication	Each cycle end	Teachers & Admin	Share screening/progress results, next steps

Additional Information

- Use [Publisher Name] national norms for cut points and goal setting
- Follow district guidelines for screening duration and fidelity checks
- Store data in [Platform Name, e.g., DIBELS Data System or FastBridge]

Example

At Lincoln Elementary, the principal and instructional coach assembled a Literacy Leadership Team (LLT) made up of grade-level representatives, special educators, and the reading interventionist. Meeting monthly with a standardized agenda, the team uses student performance data and implementation checklists to guide decisions and plan action steps. In September, the LLT coordinated the universal screening process, ensuring all K–2 students were assessed within the first month of school using a reliable, valid tool. When initial data revealed that 20% of grade 1 students were at elevated risk for reading difficulties, the LLT activated protocols for assigning Tier 2 interventions and established a progress monitoring schedule to track student response every two weeks.

The team also drew on national benchmarks to guide decision-making about student movement between tiers while gradually working toward developing locally relevant criteria. They collaborated with grade-level teams to interpret screening results and ensured staff had the necessary resources, time, and training to implement the selected interventions with fidelity. Through formal feedback loops with families and staff, the LLT adjusted supports and improved communication strategies. Their work was integrated into the school's continuous improvement plan, illustrating how a coordinated, data-driven leadership structure can embed universal screening and progress monitoring into the school's broader efforts to improve reading outcomes for all learners.

2. Select a set of efficient screening measures that identify children at risk for poor reading outcomes with reasonable accuracy.

To effectively identify students at risk for reading difficulties, school leaders should select a set of efficient, reliable screening measures that provide accurate information across grade levels. Since no single measure captures all aspects of early reading development, the use of at least two screening tools per grade is recommended to improve accuracy and reduce false positives. Screening content should evolve with student development, focusing on letter knowledge and phonemic awareness in kindergarten, decoding and text reading (with speed) in grade 1, and word and passage reading in grade 2. When choosing screening tools, schools should prioritize measures with strong technical characteristics, including reliability (≥ 0.70) and predictive validity (≥ 0.60), while also weighing the practical tradeoffs of time, personnel, and complexity.

Although some important reading skills like vocabulary and comprehension lack efficient screening tools, diagnostic assessments can be used for students showing potential difficulties in those areas. A balanced approach to selecting and administering screeners supports early identification without overburdening resources or misidentifying students.

The table below (Table 1) provides some commonly used screening measures for kindergarten through grade 2. It highlights the focus, purpose, and limitations of each measure based on research from the What Works Clearinghouse.

Table 1. Recommended Target Areas for Early Screening and Progress Monitoring

Measures	Grade Level	Purpose	Skills Assessed	Limitations
Letter Naming Fluency	K–1	Screening	Letter name identification and the ability to rapidly retrieve abstract information	This measure is not well-suited for progress monitoring because students are just beginning to associate letters with sounds. It lacks validity for English learners in kindergarten but appears to be appropriate for use with grade 1 students.
Phoneme Segmentations	K–1	Screening and progress monitoring	Phonemic awareness	This measure becomes less effective for tracking progress in the second semester of grade 1, as students shift their focus from phonemic skills to decoding strategies as they develop reading proficiency.
Nonsense word fluency	1	Screening and progress monitoring	Automaticity with phonics skills and rules	This measure is restricted to very basic words and does not assess students' ability to read irregular or multisyllabic words.
Word identification	1–2	Screening and progress monitoring	Word reading	This measure overcomes many of the limitations of nonsense word fluency by incorporating both multisyllabic and irregular words.
Oral reading fluency	1–2	Screening and progress monitoring	Reading connected text accurately and fluently	While this measure demonstrates moderately strong criterion-related validity, it does not provide a comprehensive view of students' overall reading proficiency. Many students tend to score near zero at the start of grade 1, yet the measure remains a reasonable predictor of reading performance by the end of the year.

Source: Assisting Students Struggling with Reading: Response to Intervention (RtI) and Multi-Tier Intervention in the Primary Grades (Gersten et al., 2008).

Example

At Lincoln Elementary, the principal leads a collaborative process to enhance the school's approach to early reading identification. At the start of the school year, she convenes the Literacy Leadership Team, comprising of the instructional coach, reading specialists, and grade-level teachers, to review current screening practices and assess their technical quality. Using publisher manuals and research databases, the team evaluates each tool's reliability and predictive validity, ensuring selected screeners meet the recommended thresholds (≥ 0.70 for reliability and ≥ 0.60 for predictive validity). Understanding that no single tool is sufficient, the principal supports the adoption of two screening measures per grade: one that focuses on phonemic awareness and another on decoding skills in kindergarten and grade 1, and both timed and untimed word reading tasks in grade 2.

To ensure effective implementation, the principal works closely with the assistant principal and Literacy Leadership Team to create a screening schedule that minimizes disruption to instruction and distributes administration responsibilities across trained staff. Recognizing gaps in vocabulary assessment, she ensures that diagnostic tools are available for students whose performance suggests underlying language difficulties. Throughout the year, she monitors screening data and progress reports, facilitating regular review meetings with grade-level teams. By modeling data-informed decision-making and balancing technical rigor with practical feasibility, the principal fosters a schoolwide system that prioritizes early, accurate identification of students needing support without overwhelming staff or misallocating intervention resources.

3. Use benchmarks or growth rates (or a combination of the two) to identify children at low, moderate, or high risk for developing reading difficulties.

To effectively identify students at varying levels of risk for reading difficulties, school leaders should use benchmarks, growth rates, or both to classify students as low, moderate, or high risk. Establishing clear cut-points helps distinguish students who are likely to meet year-end reading expectations without additional support from those who may require intervention. While districts can develop their own benchmarks, adopting existing guidelines from national databases or predictive validity studies is often more practical, especially in the early stages of implementation. Leaders should ensure systems are in place to track progress frequently and adjust group membership based on how students respond to instruction. For high-risk students, progress should be checked weekly; for moderate-risk students, every two to three weeks. This dynamic process prevents students from remaining in a misaligned group too long.

Example

At the beginning of the school year, the principal of Lincoln Elementary leads the Literacy Leadership Team in selecting benchmark assessments aligned with national cut-points recommended by test developers and research organizations. Understanding that staff may be new to using benchmarks and growth data, she organizes professional learning sessions to help teachers interpret risk levels and understand how cut-points indicate the likelihood of meeting year-end reading goals.

Throughout the year, the principal oversees the implementation of a progress monitoring system that supplements the initial benchmark data. For students flagged as moderate or high risk, she ensures that growth rates are tracked every few weeks, enabling teachers and interventionists to make timely adjustments to instruction. She also guides data meetings where staff use both benchmarks and growth trajectories to decide when students may no longer need intensive support or, conversely, when they need additional intervention. By setting clear expectations, providing training, and building staff confidence in using data, the principal cultivates a responsive system where early reading difficulties are identified and addressed

Potential Roadblocks



It is too hard to establish district-specific benchmarks.

Suggested Approach. Establishing district-specific benchmarks can be a time-consuming process that delays identifying and supporting at-risk readers. To avoid these delays, schools are encouraged to use national benchmarks as an interim solution. These widely available, research-based standards provide a practical and reliable starting point for decision-making while the district works toward developing its own benchmarks over time. This ensures that intervention for struggling readers can begin promptly, without waiting for a full year of local data analysis.



Universal screening falsely identifies too many students.

Suggested Approach. While universal screening may initially flag more students than necessary, this is an intentional and acceptable part of the process. Casting a wide net ensures that nearly all students truly at risk are identified early, even if some students who are not ultimately in need of intervention are also included. Schools can refine this broad group through regular progress monitoring, which helps distinguish those who truly need intervention from those who do not. Using this two-step approach, broad initial screening followed by targeted monitoring, balances early identification with instructional precision.



Some students might get “stuck” in a particular tier.

Suggested Approach. Students should not remain in the same tier indefinitely if schools are using clear, data-driven decision rules to guide instruction. Remaining in a particular tier may be appropriate if the instruction is well-matched to the student’s needs and they are making progress. However, to prevent students from becoming “stuck,” schools should regularly review progress data and allow for flexible movement between tiers based on individual responses to instruction. Tiers are not fixed groupings, but fluid levels of support that adjust to each student’s learning trajectory. Students demonstrating adequate progress in Tier 2 or Tier 3 should have opportunities to transition to less intensive supports while continuing to receive what they need to be successful.



Some teachers place students in tutoring when they are only one point below the benchmark.

Suggested Approach. Decisions about student placement should not rely solely on a single benchmark point. When a student’s score falls just below or just above the benchmark, schools should consider the test’s confidence interval, typically provided in the assessment’s technical manual. If the student’s score is within that margin of uncertainty, it’s recommended to either administer an additional assessment or monitor the student’s progress over a short period (such as six weeks). This ensures that instructional support is reserved for students who truly need it, based on more than a single data point.

Additional Resources

Data Evaluation to Promote Literacy Success. REL Southeast.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOuDV8j_dVw

This video features Dr. Barbara Foorman from REL Southeast explaining foundational concepts in early literacy assessment. She outlines how screening, diagnosis, progress monitoring, and outcome assessments work together to identify students at risk, pinpoint specific instructional needs, and track growth to inform teaching practices. The video provides examples and definitions to support educators in using data more effectively to guide literacy instruction.

Strategies for Using Data to Deliver Differentiated Reading Instruction to Students in Early Grades. REL Midwest. <https://ies.ed.gov/learn/blog/strategies-using-data-deliver-differentiated-reading-instruction-students-early-grades>

This blog highlights the importance of using assessment data, both universal screening and diagnostic tools, to provide differentiated reading instruction in early grades. An example is provided for how educators learned may use data to tailor instruction and monitor student progress, ensuring that each child receives targeted support aligned to their specific literacy needs.

Leadership Area	Level of Evidence
Literacy	 Minimal

RECOMMENDATION 2

Provide time for differentiated reading instruction for all students based on assessments of students' current reading level.

Schools and teachers must use assessment data to guide differentiated reading instruction for all students as part of high-quality Tier 1 instruction. While there is limited research outlining a single, comprehensive model for teaching reading in the early grades, the panel underscores that effective Tier 1 instruction, rooted in ongoing data use, is the foundation of any successful Response to Intervention (RtI) system. Differentiation in Tier 1 means adjusting instruction to meet the diverse needs of all learners, not just those at risk. For example, students who need support in vocabulary might engage in targeted partner work, while others deepen comprehension through discussions about character analysis. By regularly using data from universal screeners and progress monitoring tools, teachers can form flexible groups and tailor instruction to specific reading skills. Although the boundaries between Tier 1 and Tier 2 may at times overlap, the goal is for data-driven differentiation to be embedded throughout all levels of instruction, ensuring that each student receives support aligned with their current needs.

Strategies

1. Provide training for teachers on how to collect and interpret student data on reading efficiently and reliably.

School leaders and principals play a critical role in supporting effective differentiated reading instruction by ensuring teachers are well-equipped to collect, interpret, and apply student reading data. This includes organizing professional development on how to efficiently use formal diagnostic tools, especially for students experiencing difficulty, and modeling the value of informal, embedded assessments such as listening to a student read aloud or summarize a text. Principals can promote a culture of data-informed instruction by scheduling time for collaborative analysis, encouraging peer learning, and aligning instructional planning with data insights. By prioritizing teacher training and creating structures for meaningful data use (see sample template below), principals help ensure classroom instruction is responsive to student needs and grounded in sound assessment practices.

Sample Data Discussion Protocol

Meeting Agenda Outline

Time	Discussion Step	Guiding Questions
5 min	Welcome & Focus Setting	• What is our goal today? • Which students or data trends should we prioritize?
10 min	Review Current Data (Screening/Progress Monitoring)	• What does the data tell us about student performance across tiers? • Are there emerging trends by skill?
10 min	Student-Level Spotlight (1–2 students)	• What is Student X’s current skill profile? • How have they responded to instruction or intervention?
10 min	Instructional Decisions	• Do groupings need to change? • What instructional adjustments are needed? • What additional data do we need?
10 min	Strategy Sharing/ Classroom Insights	• What’s working in small groups? • How are we using informal data (e.g., read-alouds, writing)?
5 min	Plan Next Steps	• What specific actions will we take this week? • Who is responsible for follow-up?

Data Protocol Materials Checklist

- ✓ Grade-level reading benchmark data (e.g., DIBELS 8th Edition WCPM)
- ✓ Recent progress monitoring graphs or summaries
- ✓ Student work samples (if relevant)
- ✓ Classroom observations or anecdotal notes
- ✓ Grouping rosters and instructional plans

Facilitator Tips

- Focus on student growth, not just benchmarks.
 - Use a strengths-based lens when discussing student needs.
 - Document agreed-upon changes and revisit at the next meeting.
 - Encourage collaborative problem-solving — no one works in isolation.
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Example

At Lincoln Elementary, the principal leads a schoolwide initiative to strengthen differentiated reading instruction by improving how teachers use student data. Early in the year, he arranges professional development sessions focused on interpreting diagnostic assessments and using classroom-based strategies, such as student read-alouds and comprehension summaries, to gather informal insights. To support daily practice, she works with the instructional coach to develop quick-reference guides and discussion protocols for data meetings.

Throughout the year, the principal schedules regular grade-level data team meetings, ensuring teachers have protected time to review screening and progress monitoring results together. During classroom walkthroughs, he provides feedback that highlights effective use of data to group students and tailor instruction. When a teacher shares concerns about a student not responding to intervention, the principal facilitates a collaborative review of the student's diagnostic results and observational notes, helping the team decide on next steps. By embedding data-informed decision-making into both professional learning and instructional routines, the principal creates a culture where reading instruction is continually adjusted to meet students' evolving needs.

2. Develop data-driven decision rules for providing differentiated instruction to students at varied reading proficiency levels for part of the day.

One critical responsibility of the school principal is leading the development of clear, data-driven decision rules that help teachers group students and allocate instructional time based on current reading proficiency. For example, principals can work with instructional teams to define when and how students transition into independent reading activities, which should increase only as students demonstrate fluency in word recognition or connected text. Early in the school year, especially in grade 1, principals should support classroom structures that limit independent reading time for developing readers, instead emphasizing targeted instruction. By ensuring instructional activities align with students' demonstrated skill levels, and by supporting gradual release of responsibility to students, principals help build classrooms where time is used effectively and students are set up for success.

Example of Teacher Reference Chart for Differentiated Reading Instruction

Proficiency Group	Assessment Indicators	Instructional Focus	Recommended Time Allocation
Emergent Readers	Lacking letter-sound knowledge, weak phonemic segmentation	Phonemic awareness, phonics, blending (explicit, systematic instruction)	40–50 min small group ≤10 min independent (decodable/controlled)
Developing Readers	Basic decoding, low fluency, inconsistent word recognition	Fluency-building, multisyllabic word decoding, oral language	30–40 min small group 20–30 min scaffolded independent tasks
Proficient Readers	Fluent decoding, basic comprehension, moderate vocabulary	Comprehension strategies, vocabulary, syntax	20–30 min small group 30–40 min structured independent reading
Advanced Readers	Strong comprehension, robust vocabulary, automatic decoding	Text analysis, background knowledge, writing-to-read	15–20 min small group or individual conference 45+ min independent reading & projects

Example

At the start of the school year, Principal Jenkins at Brookside Elementary leads her first-grade team through an in-depth review of DIBELS 8th Edition screening results. She focuses their attention on the Oral Reading Fluency (WCPM) scores and explains how these data points can guide small group instruction and classroom routines.

Step 1: Analyzing DIBELS Data

During a professional learning session, Principal Jenkins projects the DIBELS benchmark table for Grade 1 Fall:

- 0–36 WCPM = Emergent Readers
- 37–54 WCPM = Developing Readers
- 55–71 WCPM = Proficient Readers
- 72+ WCPM = Advanced Readers

She distributes color-coded class lists based on these groupings and facilitates team planning time for teachers to form initial reading groups.

“These benchmarks help us tailor instruction with precision,” she explains. “They aren’t labels, they’re starting points for daily decisions that ensure each student receives what they need, when they need it.”

Step 2: Introducing Decision Rules

Principal Jenkins then provides each teacher with a simple reference guide.

WCPM Score	Group Name	Instructional Focus	Independent Reading
0–36	Emergent Readers	Phonemic awareness, letter-sound work, decoding (explicit)	0–10 min max, decodable texts only
37–54	Developing Readers	Fluency-building, repeated readings, high-frequency word work	20–30 min scaffolded practice
55–71	Proficient Readers	Comprehension strategies, oral discussion, structured routines	30–40 min structured independent reading
72+	Advanced Readers	Text analysis, project-based learning, written response	45+ min independent reading & choice projects

She reminds staff to avoid assigning independent reading to students who have not yet achieved decoding fluency.

Step 3: Supporting Implementation

Over the next several weeks, Principal Jenkins:

- Conducts weekly walkthroughs, checking that small group rotations reflect student data.
- Hosts biweekly data meetings where teachers bring updated WCPM scores and instructional notes.
- Provides coaching support, ensuring each teacher has access to decodable text libraries, aligned fluency passages, and comprehension rubrics.

Principal Reflection

Principal Jenkins reflects on this focus on data and recognizes that the use of decision rules keep instruction responsive and expectations aligned with what the research says works. Principal Jenkins continues to refine the system with teacher input, reinforcing a school culture where data, not guesswork, drives every reading decision.

Potential Roadblocks



It is difficult for teachers to interpret assessment results and subsequently use the information for instruction.

Suggested Approach. Teachers' instruction may be more effective with proper training. Provide ongoing professional development for teachers focused on how to administer assessments, interpret the results, and use the information.



Using multiple small groups is difficult when some children have difficulty paying attention, working independently, and interacting with peers.

Suggested Approach. To support effective reading instruction, principals should ensure that strong classroom management routines are established and consistently followed. Principals and leaders can play a key role by providing teachers with practical support and motivational strategies, particularly for managing independent and small-group activities during reading time. This helps create a focused, well-organized learning environment where differentiated instruction can thrive.

Additional Resources

Developing Strong Foundational Literacy Skills in Children — It Takes All of Us! Institute of Education Sciences. <https://ies.ed.gov/rel-southeast/2025/01/developing-strong-foundational-literacy-skills-children-it-takes-all-us>

This infographic framework provides links to resources on foundational literacy for communities, state and district leaders, families and caregivers, and teachers and school leaders.

Using Student Achievement Data to Support Instructional Decision Making. WWC Practice Guide. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/WWC/Docs/PracticeGuide/dddm_pg_092909.pdf

This guide offers five recommendations to help educators effectively use data to monitor students' academic progress and evaluate instructional practices.

References

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