

**BACK TO
SCHOOL** | 2025

Stronger Readers, Stronger Schools: A Back-to-School Resource Pack for Literacy Leadership

This whitepaper brings together key insights and strategies to help literacy leaders strengthen reading outcomes and support educators. From early intervention to student motivation and teacher retention, each article offers practical, research-based guidance for a successful school year.

Table of Contents

The Power of Literacy,
The Promise of EPS Learning 3

Before the Special Ed Referral:
Strengthening Early Literacy and MTSS 4

Student Motivation for Reading:
The Power of Voice and Choice..... 6

4 High-Impact Actions to Boost Teacher
Retention and Elevate Literacy Outcomes 8

The Power of Literacy, The Promise of EPS Learning

At EPS Learning, we believe literacy is an essential springboard to lifelong learning and opportunity. We uphold literacy as a fundamental human right and are dedicated to empowering educators with the research-backed solutions they need to nurture, strengthen, and grow the confident, capable reader in every child.

Driven by Research and Innovation

Our company's origins stretch back to the 1950s and the pioneering Orton-Gillingham (OG) approach—a structured, multisensory method that has transformed learning for students who thrive with explicit, systematic reading instruction. As the original publishers of the Gillingham Manual, we are proud to claim deep roots in Orton-Gillingham methodologies. In fact, staying true to research and proven practices that support both students and educators from PreK through 12th grade is at the heart of who we are. Our commitment to ongoing innovation serves one purpose: to meet the needs of children, educators, and families, ensuring that every student can harness the sustaining power of literacy.

Belief in Teachers

We believe the teacher-student bond is the cornerstone of teacher satisfaction and student learning. That is why we provide solutions that equip educators to engage fully in the creative art of teaching. Our products are designed to be teacher-friendly and student-centered, supporting educators as they guide each student's journey. We champion teacher-directed instruction, and we view technology as a valuable tool to lighten teachers' workloads, further accelerate student growth, and make more space for the essential human elements of education.



Trusted Partners in Education

For us, literacy education goes beyond curriculum; it's about relationships. In tandem with our solutions, we collaborate closely with district and school partners to energize and drive progress toward their literacy and learning goals for both students and educators. We work together with district and school leaders in delivering true solutions—spanning print and digital—to address literacy challenges, improve outcomes for students, and grow confidence in educators. We provide robust customer success and professional learning for teachers, paraprofessionals, and education leaders, along with coaching and implementation support, creating transformational results.

A Vision for the Future

Every student deserves to become a lifelong reader, and every teacher deserves the tools to make that vision a reality. We are honored to partner with district leaders, school leaders, teachers, and those who share this vision of literacy for all—individuals who are passionate about shaping a journey that begins in today's classrooms and extends into a bright, boundless future.

Before the Special Ed Referral: Strengthening Early Literacy and MTSS

Across the country, special education referrals are on the rise. According to [an analysis of federal data](#), 15% of public-school students in the U.S. received special education services during the 2022-23 school year. This is a record high that reflects both increased need as well as improved identification practices. As special education caseloads grow and educators strain to meet student needs, district and school leaders must ask: Are we doing everything we can to meet students' needs before they require a special education referral?

Understanding the Increase

Several factors are contributing to the surge in special education referrals, including:

- Increases in autism and dyslexia diagnoses
- Pandemic-era impacts on emotional regulation and executive functioning
- Improved screening practices that reveal foundational literacy gaps

These trends have surfaced a critical truth: today's special education systems were not built for today's needs.

A Systems Solution: MTSS as a Framework and a Mindset

A strong Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) can help districts respond with strategic, long-term solutions. Thinking about MTSS as both a framework as well as a mindset, MTSS is a way for leaders to think systemically and holistically about student support. When implemented effectively, MTSS:

- Aligns instruction, intervention, and resources.
- Fosters collaboration among general education, intervention, and special education teams.
- Increases student success within general education—preventing unnecessary special education referrals.

Literacy Development Through MTSS

Consider how MTSS can support literacy development across grade levels:

Tier 1 Literacy Instruction in PreK-2

To help young learners build a strong reading foundation:

- Implement universal screening to identify students at risk.
- Provide explicit, systematic instruction that follows Structured Literacy and Orton-Gillingham principles.
- Include daily reading practice in decodable readers or other “just right” texts.
- Use high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) to reduce planning load and support instructional consistency.





Targeted (Tier 2) and Intensive (Tier 3) Intervention in PreK-2

Early identification of struggle enables timely intervention. Is each student progressing as expected, once explicit, systematic phonics instruction is implemented? Young learners who have not yet mastered essential foundational skills should receive Structured Literacy support focused on:

- Phonological and phonemic awareness
- Phonics and decoding
- Oral language and vocabulary development to support comprehension

Tier 1 Literacy Instruction in Grade 3 and Beyond

All students benefit from grade-level ELA and content-area instruction. Striving readers often require embedded scaffolds and supports to access the curriculum.

Targeted (Tier 2) and Intensive (Tier 3) Intervention in Grade 3 and Beyond

During intervention periods, striving readers can receive support matched to their needs, based on diagnostic assessment. This may include:

- Structured Literacy, Orton-Gillingham-based decoding intervention
- Advanced word study for multisyllabic word reading
- Academic vocabulary development
- Explicit instruction in comprehension skills and strategies

With well-matched, evidence-based intervention, many students can accelerate progress without requiring special education evaluation.

Leading for Prevention and Appropriate Placement

Special education services remain essential—every student deserves an education that meets their individual needs. By strengthening Tier 1 instruction and layering in the right Tiers 2 and 3 supports, leaders create a learning environment that is proactive, sustainable, and student-centered. By investing in strong early literacy and a cohesive MTSS structure, district and school leaders can change the trajectory of many students' academic journeys—long before a special education referral becomes necessary.

Student Motivation for Reading: The Power of Voice and Choice

Motivating students to read, particularly in upper elementary and secondary grades, can be a challenge. As texts become more complex and academic demands intensify, some students lose enthusiasm for reading and disengage. However, research shows that when students are given voice and choice in their reading experiences, motivation and engagement grow (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

What Research Tells Us About Motivation

Research on reading motivation shows that students are more intrinsically motivated—in other words, motivated from within—when they are given choice in what they read, especially when text options are well matched to their reading abilities. Students are further engaged when they can collaborate with peers around reading and when reading materials are relevant to their lives, interests, and goals (Guthrie, et al. 2004).

These findings align with research in the realm of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a framework for understanding human motivation. According to SDT, a person is motivated when they have:

- **Autonomy:** the freedom to make choices
- **Competence:** the belief that they are capable and effective
- **Relatedness:** a sense of connection to others

When educators give students voice and choice as readers, they help address needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This, in turn, leads to intrinsic motivation for reading, which helps drive more reading and greater growth.



What Do We Mean by Voice and Choice in Reading?

Voice refers to students' opportunities to express ideas, opinions, identities, and interests. It could involve reflecting on a character's experience, connecting a theme to their own lives, or engaging in discussion.

Choice involves offering students options in what they read or how they demonstrate understanding. It might include choosing between texts or demonstrating understanding through writing, art, or conversation.

These practices are reinforced by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop's concept of "Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors," which emphasizes the importance of offering texts that reflect students' experiences (mirrors), introduce them to others' perspectives (windows), and transport them to new worlds (sliding glass doors), strengthening identity, empathy, and imagination.

Why Voice and Choice Matter

When students are trusted to make choices (autonomy), engage in tasks aligned with their strengths (competence), and explore ideas in supportive, affirming environments (relatedness), their motivation for reading and learning are likely to grow. The result is more frequent reading, deeper engagement, and increased pleasure in reading and learning.

Of course, to fully benefit from these opportunities, students must have the foundational literacy skills that enable access to grade-level texts. Ensuring decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills are in place is essential—and voice and choice can still be strongly supported as striving readers build proficiency.

Practical Approaches for Educators

Incorporating voice and choice does not equate to a lack of structure. Practical strategies aligned to curricular goals include:

- Offering curated book selections aligned to learning goals
- Facilitating literature circles with multiple text options
- Providing “Choice Boards” with menus of options for demonstrating understanding
- Encouraging text reflections through personal response journals
- Using self-assessment or peer-assessment tools, based on rubrics
- Designing group discussions that invite all voices
- Creating collaborative activities that foster connection and community

A Call to Action

When educators give students voice and offer meaningful choices, they foster motivation, personal agency, and connection. Combined with a strong reading foundation, these practices help students grow as readers and engaged learners.



4 High-Impact Actions to Boost Teacher Retention and Elevate Literacy Outcomes

Districts across the country are facing two urgent challenges: persistent literacy gaps and high rates of teacher turnover. While often tackled separately, these challenges are interconnected. Teachers are more likely to remain in schools where they feel effective, supported, and part of a shared mission—and few missions are more galvanizing than helping every child and young person become a confident, capable reader.

Rather than searching for solutions to each challenge in isolation, district leaders can take a strategic, multipronged approach that improves literacy outcomes while strengthening teacher satisfaction and retention. Research suggests that by investing in strong teacher preparation, sustained professional learning, and positive working conditions, districts can accelerate students' literacy growth and improve teacher retention simultaneously.

A Path Forward Points to Four Actions District and School Leaders Can Take

ACTION #1

Prepare and Support Teachers with Professional Learning and Mentorship

Unfortunately, too many teachers enter the profession underprepared to teach reading effectively. A [2023 analysis by the National Council on Teacher Quality](#) found that only 25% of teacher preparation programs fully cover the five pillars of evidence-based reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Even fewer address how to meet the needs of students with dyslexia or multilingual learners.

Preparation gaps often leave teachers—especially new teachers—feeling overwhelmed. Up to 50% of teachers leave the profession within their first five years, often citing challenging working conditions and a lack of support. Strong support, guidance, and orientation programs, including mentoring programs, can change that trajectory and [lead to higher levels of teacher retention](#) (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004).

Districts can strengthen both retention and literacy outcomes by ensuring that new teachers—or those new to teaching reading in alignment with the science of reading (SOR)—receive [professional learning in the science of reading \(SOR\)](#), high-quality instructional materials built on the SOR-based Structured Literacy approach, and ongoing job-embedded coaching. It is equally important to attend to the needs of upper elementary and secondary teachers who work with students lacking strong foundational reading skills, such as decoding. These educators must also be empowered with the knowledge, resources, and instructional strategies necessary to incorporate Structured Literacy practices into their classrooms, enabling them to help students close skill gaps and accelerate growth.

ACTION #2

Foster Collaborative Cultures that Put Literacy at the Center

Teachers are more likely to stay when they feel part of collaborative professional community. Even participation in a single, collaborative team within a school [can foster greater commitment and job satisfaction](#). (Meredith et al., 2022).



Literacy instruction lends itself well to collaboration. Grade-level and cross-grade teams can analyze student performance data, implement targeted interventions, and problem-solve together around instructional challenges. Research emphasizes that the context for professional learning—namely, a culture of trust, respect, and enthusiasm—is just as important as the content (Weston et al., 2021).

Districts and schools can help drive positive outcomes by protecting time for literacy-focused professional learning communities (PLCs), aligning collaborative work to clear goals, and celebrating collective progress in reading achievement.

ACTION #3

Strengthen Instructional Leadership and Build Literacy-Focused Cultures

According to *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (2004), school leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student outcomes. Strong school leaders make their greatest impact by

setting clear directions, developing people, and designing organizational systems to support teaching and learning.

In the context of literacy, this means principals and instructional leaders can:

- Articulate a shared vision for evidence-based reading instruction, firmly grounded in the science of reading, across all tiers of instruction and special education.
- Ensure teachers receive aligned professional learning and ongoing support.
- Actively oversee implementation of evidence-based instruction and intervention, removing barriers that hinder progress.

ACTION #4

Implement Evidence-Based Literacy Programs with Strong Support

Adopting an evidence-based literacy program grounded in the science of reading is essential, but not enough. According to implementation science research, professional learning, coaching, and leadership alignment are all critical to achieving lasting impact for both teachers and students.

Districts should prioritize evidence-based programs that include support for educators to implement them successfully. When solution providers serve as true partners—offering initial training, ongoing coaching, and data tools—teachers grow more confident as literacy instructors and their sense of self-efficacy increases. Research shows that a teacher's belief in their own effectiveness is one of the most powerful predictors of job satisfaction, a key factor in long-term retention.

EPS Learning's solutions, including SPIRE Intervention and Reading Accelerator, exemplify this model:

- SPIRE Intervention provides explicit, systematic instruction in foundational reading skills, delivered through an Orton-Gillingham-based Structured Literacy approach. Proven effective for students with reading challenges, including dyslexia, SPIRE requires only one day of training to get started, and offers job-embedded coaching and support for educators in Tier 3 and special education settings.
- Reading Accelerator is an evidence-based Tier 2 intervention for students in elementary and secondary grades whose comprehension levels have stalled due to gaps in decoding skills. Through a blended learning model that pairs teacher-led instruction with AI-driven personalized reading practice, students master foundational decoding, increase fluency, and strengthen proficiency. Teachers can get started after just one day of training, and they are supported in their ongoing learning as they use the program to drive rapid progress for their students.

By selecting evidence-based programs that are easy to implement and come with robust support, districts can reduce turnover and build an empowered group of literacy educators.

Visit epslearning.com to view our range of curriculum programs. Questions? Contact your EPS Learning Account Executive.

epslearning.com | 866.716.2820



Literacy Success and Teacher Satisfaction Go Hand in Hand

When teachers are equipped to teach well, they stay. When schools retain experienced, skilled educators, student outcomes improve. These goals are not separate—they are inextricably linked.

By investing in teacher preparation, professional collaboration, instructional leadership, and evidence-based literacy programs with strong implementation support, district leaders can address two pressing challenges with one multi-pronged strategy.

The path to better literacy begins with strong teacher support. The path to higher retention starts with empowering teachers to do the deeply satisfying work of helping every student become a confident, lifelong reader.

