

EARLY LITERACY SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS:

A COHERENT PATH FORWARD



OVERVIEW OF CURRENT ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN TENNESSEE

Since 2021, Tennessee has transformed literacy instruction by codifying the research on effective early literacy instruction into policy. This approach focuses on *systematic, explicit phonics instruction and regular opportunities to build knowledge through reading and responding to complex texts*. The legislation, investment, and resulting practice in schools is working. The latest statewide results show that 40 percent of third graders are now reading on grade level, exceeding prepandemic rates. Despite this growth, Tennessee's students who are furthest behind are struggling to keep up. This may be because Tennessee's intervention framework has not kept pace with the advancements made in core literacy instruction, specifically, the use of high-quality instructional materials and assessments.

Tennessee's Response to Instruction and Intervention Framework (RTI²), in place since 2014, is a tiered system that prescribes different amounts of time, materials, assessments, and group sizes for academic support outside of the core instructional block based on a student's achievement level — *typically for students performing below the 25th percentile*. The interventions put in place for these students are not *instructionally coherent* with what they experience during core instruction. For example, students receiving the most intervention support (Tier 3) spend nearly five hours a week using curriculum that is different from a district's adopted high-quality materials. In some cases, intervention is delivered by a computer program rather than a licensed educator. While the RTI² framework is well-intentioned, it has created an incoherent process and instructional model where students who need the most support with grade-level content are systematically receiving something different.

A NEW VISION FOR ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN EARLY GRADES LITERACY

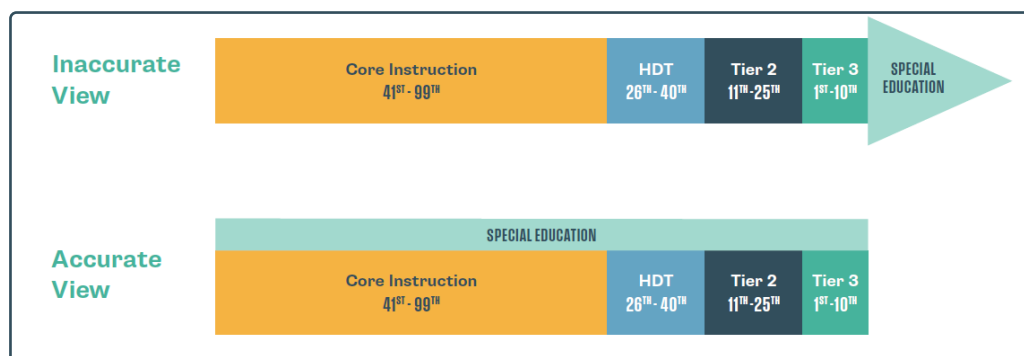
In 2021, Tennessee made a large investment in high-dosage tutoring (HDT) to support students post-pandemic. Guidance for HDT implementation from the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) encouraged districts to 1) offer HDT to students scoring between the 26th-40th percentile, 2) use high-quality instructional materials aligned with classroom content, and 3) structure HDT support in groups of no more than three students for 30-45 minutes twice a week. Despite spending less time in HDT, case study data from four Tennessee districts show that instructionally coherent support may make a larger impact on student growth compared to current RTI² practices.

In 2022-23, the average percentile growth was tracked for 15,937 first- through third-graders without IEPs and 3,048 with IEPs using universal literacy screeners. Results reveal that students who started the year furthest behind grew the most, on average, in an HDT structure with high-quality instructional materials aligned to core instruction. Placement in RTI² Tier 3, however, resulted in an average decline in performance.

All Students: Average Composite Score Percentile Growth From Beginning To End Of Year				
Beginning-Of-Year Percentile Performance Range	Core Literacy Instruction Only	HDT	RTI ² Tier 2	RTI ² Tier 3
1st-10th Percentile	8.6	19.3*	11.0	5.7
11th-25th Percentile	11.5	11.7	7.8*	-1.2*
26th-40th Percentile	6.5	5.7	1.6*	-1.6*
41st-99th Percentile	-0.5	-1.6	0.8*	-5.9*

Statistically significant results are displayed with an asterisk using a .05 level of significance. The trends above were also consistent when analyzing growth between the beginning and mid-year administrations of universal literacy screeners as well as mid-year to end-of-year administrations, separately.

While a similar analysis was attempted for students with IEPs, too few students were served in an HDT setting over the course of the year to complete it. This may point to an access issue to students' Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), a key principle from federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legislation. Given that 99 percent of K-12 students in Tennessee are held accountable to the same grade-level standards at the end of the year (only 1.4 percent are assessed with the MSAA/TCAP-Alt alternate assessment), it is increasingly important to conceptualize placement and support of students with IEPs across the spectrum of academic support in Tennessee, rather than the end result of an RTI² process or percentile range on a universal screener.



A PATH FORWARD

While no single set of supports will meet every student's needs, achievement in literacy may be maximized by providing students who are furthest behind with instructionally coherent HDT. In this model, schools would serve more students efficiently and effectively by clarifying the RTI² Framework as the process for student identification, progress monitoring, caregiver notification, and decision-making around HDT support intensity and special education referrals.

To support schools and districts with this transition, Tennessee should:

1. **Expand the vision** for research-aligned literacy instruction and use of high-quality instructional materials to settings beyond the core literacy block to increase support for all learners.
2. **Revise the framework** for student academic support to reflect the research on and the state's investment in high-quality instructional materials and high-dosage tutoring.
3. **Align the support** the state offers to districts, schools, educators, and families to the new vision and framework to ensure high-quality implementation and improve student outcomes.

To learn more, see the full report: *Early Literacy Success For All Students: A Coherent Path Forward*.

SCORE is also pleased to share a set of **K-3 Literacy Instructional Coherence Tools** (grounded in the learnings from the districts featured in the report) to guide system- and school-level planning.

