EARLY LITERACY SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS:

A COHERENT PATH FORWARD

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Over the last several years, Tennessee has passed legislation and guidance around adoption, purchase, training, and use of high-quality instructional materials in early grades literacy. These efforts have been grounded in research on how students best learn to read — *through a focus on systematic, explicit phonics instruction and regular opportunities to build knowledge through reading and responding to complex texts.*[1] These policies and practices are beginning to transform and strengthen instruction, with the latest statewide results from the 2022-23 school year showing that 40 percent of third graders are now reading on grade level — the highest percentage since the state raised academic standards nearly a decade ago.[2]

However, the use of these materials and the vision for reading instruction have not yet infiltrated Tennessee's system of academic support for students who are furthest behind — a group of students that has continued to grow.

The Response to Instruction and Intervention Framework (RTI[2]), which has been in place in Tennessee since the 2014-15 school year, encourages use of materials that target "identified area(s) of deficit" for students in the state who are furthest away from grade-level literacy success.[3] In the most intensive RTI[2] structure (known as Tier 3), districts are directed to offer intervention for nearly five hours a week. The impact of this approach results in *almost an entire day of learning for Tennessee's students who are furthest behind that does not leverage the adopted high-quality materials used in their building for core literacy instruction.*

To be clear, this scenario is not unique to Tennessee. Many states and districts have systems and structures dedicated to "academic intervention" for students who are struggling to perform on grade level. In fact, a majority of states are still at the starting line for improving core literacy instruction as they have not enacted policies that require adoption and purchase of high-quality instructional materials in early grades literacy.

Since the initial adoption of Tennessee's RTI[2] Framework, the research on reading instruction, availability of high-quality instructional materials, and evidence for high-dosage tutoring (HDT) as an effective support structure have come a long way. Together, they provide an opportunity for Tennessee to cast a new, ***instructionally coherent vision*** for K-3 literacy.

An instructionally coherent approach creates a roadmap for decision-making that ensures "every element of an instructional program and its strategies — from core instruction to interventions to extended time — work together to advance the same set of grade-level student experiences."[4] Rather than offering students something different in an academic support setting, it adheres to a principle that *students who are academically behind should receive additional time and support with the foundational literacy skills, texts, and tasks that align to core instruction.*

An instructionally coherent approach to K-3 literacy would create fundamentally different experiences for teaching and learning.

- **For students who are furthest behind,** rather than navigating between different programs, they would experience more practice with familiar foundational skills routines, sequences, and materials to shore up any gaps, along with greater support to engage with the same texts, discussion prompts, and writing tasks they need to achieve grade-level reading success.

- **For certified educators and support staff,** rather than trying to collaborate on student progress using different materials and assessments, they would plan with shared materials and data to monitor and guide student learning.

- **For districts and schools,** rather than funding content and staff for RTI[2] Tier 2, RTI[2] Tier 3, and HDT as three distinct structures, they would align resources and staff for student support more strategically by clarifying HDT as the structure for support and RTI[2] as the process for student identification and progress monitoring.

As Tennessee considers an instructionally coherent path forward for K-3 literacy, this paper offers:

➡ **An overview of existing student academic support structures in the state**

➡ **Data from four districts that point to the potential impact of instructionally coherent HDT**

➡ **Proposed next steps to foster instructional coherence in K-3 literacy for all students**

AN INCOHERENT EXPERIENCE IN EARLY GRADES LITERACY

Imagine this scenario — *a scenario that was observed in a school in Tennessee last year.* Five second graders identified as needing additional help with literacy are about to receive additional support. According to Tennessee guidance, three of them will receive high-dosage tutoring because they performed between the 26th-40th percentile on a universal literacy screener. The remaining two students scored between the 1st-10th percentile and will receive support known as RTI[2] Tier 3.

The three students identified for HDT are grouped together. They spend 30 minutes with a certified educator taking turns reading aloud, responding to questions, practicing tricky spellings, and receiving feedback from the teacher — all grounded in the same materials they are expected to master from their core literacy block. The tutoring session is joyful, with students smiling and supporting each other in their learning. These students will return to this group three times a week for 30-minute sessions until their scores improve or indicate they need additional support.
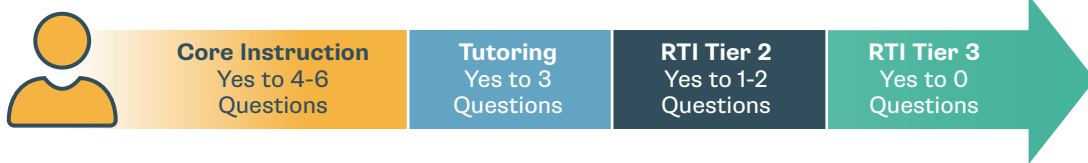
In contrast, two students receiving RTI[2] Tier 3 support make their way to computers where they engage independently with a program that is intended to support their literacy development — a program that is different from the materials in their core literacy class. They are observed working hard on their computers but also pause frequently to look around and watch the active tutoring group sitting across the room. These two students will return to this program for 45 minutes a day, five days a week until their scores improve or until a determination is made to assess them for special education services.

Consider how this approach to academic support plays out if the goal is excellent basketball skills instead of grade-level literacy. While this scenario does not tell the story of every student in Tennessee, it does reflect a common experience for many of them. *(See diagram on next page)*

BASKETBALL SELF-ASSESSMENT UNIVERSAL SCREENER

Step 1: Take This Basketball Self-Assessment

1. I know what a layup is.
2. I can dribble a ball for three minutes.
3. I can dribble a ball between my legs while walking.
4. I could make one out of two layup attempts.
5. I could make one out of three free throw attempts.
6. I have made two or more three-point shots in my lifetime (game time or practice).

Core Instruction	Tutoring	RTI Tier 2	RTI Tier 3
Yes to 4-6 Questions	Yes to 3 Questions	Yes to 1-2 Questions	Yes to 0 Questions

Step 2: Identify The Support You Need

The SCORE School of Basketball is going to allot time every day to make sure our students can meet these standards.

At the end of the year, you will all be assessed again on these skills.

BASKETBALL INTERVENTION NEXT STEPS

Remember that, at the end of the year, the expectation is that you will have mastered the six grade-level basketball skills required by the head coach.

Core Instruction Students (41st-99th Percentile). You are going to spend **all day** with the **head coach** every single day to continue to refine your already stellar basketball skills.

Tutoring Students (26th-40th Percentile). You will be **coached by someone** who has had some training to practice the six skills with you. You may or may not use the same materials as the students who are with the head coach. You will be placed in a **group of three total students,** and you will spend **90 minutes a week** in this group.

Tier 2 Students (11th-25th Percentile). You will be coached by an **assistant coach,** and they will assess you again and use different materials than the head coach. You will be placed in a **group of five total students,** and you will spend **150 minutes a week** in this group using these different assessments and materials.

Tier 3 Students (Below the 10th Percentile). You will use a **computer program** to learn more about basketball. Your head coach will get data from the computer program on how you are progressing. You will spend **225-300 minutes a week** with this program.

Applying current HDT and RTI[2] guidance and practice on the ground to something like basketball highlights the gaps in this approach. If a basketball player wanted to increase their free throw percentage but spent all of their time shooting toward a nonregulation height goal — or spent all of their time dribbling instead — they would be very unlikely to increase their free throw percentage. Similarly, students who do not receive increased support with grade-level work in ways that are consistent may struggle to meet those standards.

While assigning struggling students to new settings, assessments, materials, and tutors or interventionists at the "first sign of weakness" is well-intentioned, it creates a system where students who need the most support with grade-level content are systematically receiving something different. Given that current Tennessee guidance for students in Tier 2 or Tier 3 settings also encourages the use of nationally normed assessments to monitor their progress every two weeks, results may be sending educators misleading signals about student growth.[5] The potential impact of this is enormous. Before students have an opportunity for extended, small-group support with adopted high-quality instructional materials, they begin to work towards success with different materials. Then as student progress is assessed every other week, the certified general educators, bilingual educators, special educators, and other instructional staff who support them may make decisions based on data that inadvertently indicate students should receive even more intensive intervention, or, in some cases, identify them for special education services.

A HISTORY OF EARLY LITERACY POLICY AND TRENDS IN TENNESSEE

In line with trends across the nation, the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on student academic performance in Tennessee. Proficiency rates in English language arts (ELA) declined by nearly 6 percentage points between the spring of 2019 and 2021.[6] However, by the spring of 2022, student learning loss in ELA in Tennessee was recovered and proficiency was even higher, on average, than the prepandemic rate. This trend has continued into 2023.[7][8]

One contributing factor to this overall pattern of recovery may be Tennessee's commitment over the last decade to taking strong steps to improve both policy and practice in early literacy. In 2014, Tennessee adopted revised K-12 literacy standards, which began a pattern of responding to research on how best to teach students to read.[9] As a result of the Tennessee Literacy Success Act passed in 2021, Tennessee now has policies that require systematic foundational skills instruction in early literacy classrooms; training on foundational skills for all early literacy instructional staff; mandated adoption and purchase of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) for core instruction to reflect alignment to state standards and research-based best practices; and submission of Foundational Literacy Skills Plans (FLSPs) documenting key components of their core instruction and intervention supports for K-5 literacy.[10]

ELA Proficiency Rates In Tennessee Surpass Prepandemic Results (Grades 3-8)

- 2019: 33.7%
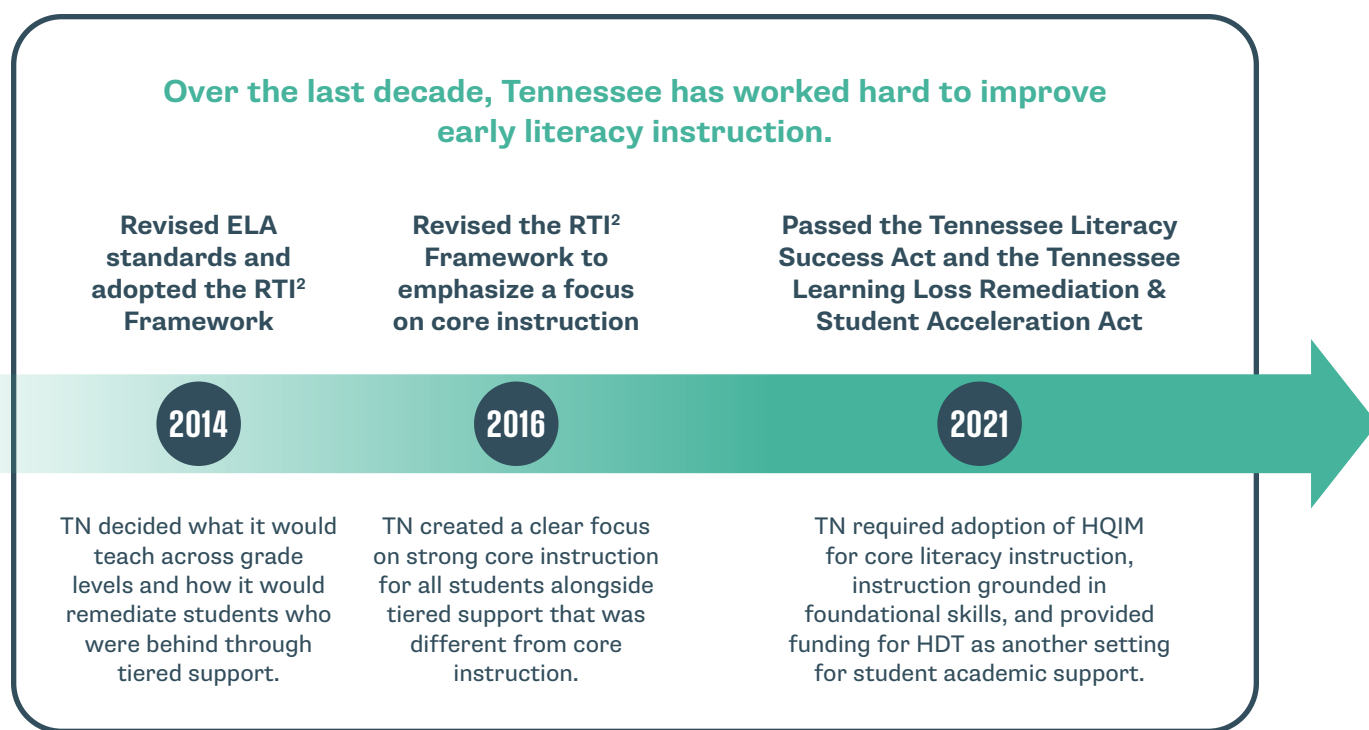- 2021: 28.4%
- 2022: 35.1%
- 2023: 36.6%
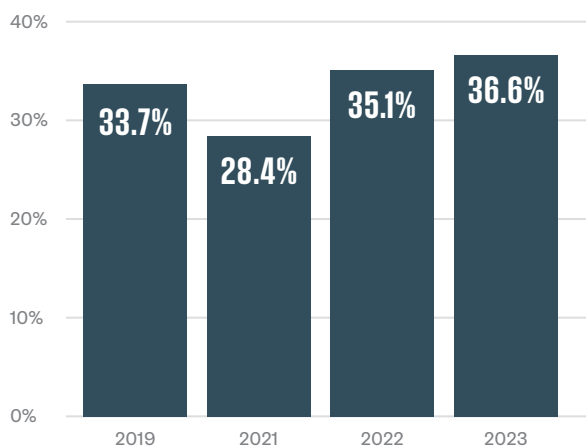
Source: TDOE, 2019-2023

In parallel to the state's focus on strong core literacy instruction, Tennessee also outlined an approach in 2014 — known as the "Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI^2) Framework — to support students who were struggling to read or do math on grade level. Under this approach, schools are required to schedule and staff two

tiers of small-group intervention (Tier 2 and Tier 3) daily — outside of core instructional time — for between 30 and 60 minutes for grades K-8.[11]

More recently, in 2021, Tennessee incentivized HDT through the launch of the TN ALL Corps Grant, providing funds to support the implementation of HDT programs to help students catch up academically.[12] For early grades literacy, conditions for funding required adherence to a tutoring group size of no more than three students and at a rate of two times a week for a minimum of 30 minutes per session.[13]

Over the last decade, Tennessee has worked hard to improve early literacy instruction.

Revised ELA standards and adopted the RTI^2 Framework

Revised the RTI^2 Framework to emphasize a focus on core instruction

Passed the Tennessee Literacy Success Act and the Tennessee Learning Loss Remediation & Student Acceleration Act

2014

2016

2021

TN decided what it would teach across grade levels and how it would remediate students who were behind through tiered support.

TN created a clear focus on strong core instruction for all students alongside tiered support that was different from core instruction.

TN required adoption of HQIM for core literacy instruction, instruction grounded in foundational skills, and provided funding for HDT as another setting for student academic support.
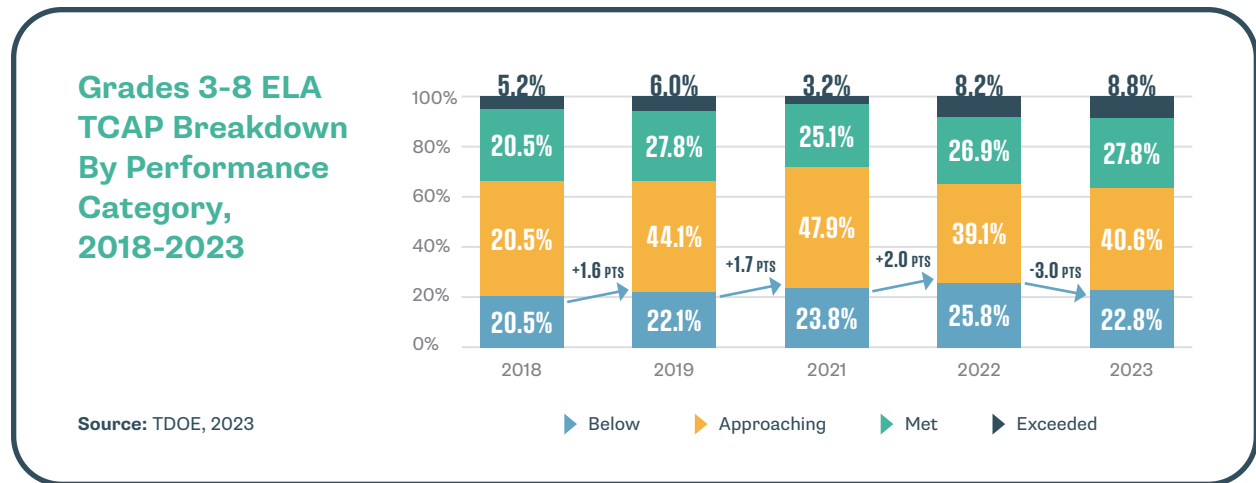
Given that both structures promote the use of small-group support, guidance was offered to use cut-scores from universal literacy screeners to determine whether students received HDT or RTI^2 support. Students scoring below the 25th percentile were suggested to receive RTI^2 support, and students performing between the 26th-40th percentile were suggested to receive HDT. For HDT, districts were encouraged to leverage

their existing high-quality instructional materials; whereas for RTI^2, districts were encouraged to continue to use intervention materials focused on specific student skill deficits.

Despite all of this incredible work and support, a deeper look at ELA proficiency trends in Tennessee for 3rd-8th graders reveals the percent of students scoring in the lowest performance

category has not yet returned to prepandemic rates — and, in fact, was growing between 2018 and 2022.[15] When looking at just third graders over time, the most recent TCAP results from spring 2023 are consistent with this trend — revealing a higher percentage of students in the state's lowest performance category compared to prepandemic trends from 2018 and 2019.[16] Unfortunately, these results indicate there is more to be done to support students who are the furthest behind, begging a deeper look at how the strong literacy policies and practices may or may not be serving all students.

Grades 3-8 ELA TCAP Breakdown By Performance Category, 2018-2023

	2018	2019	2021	2022	2023
Exceeded	5.2%	6.0%	3.2%	8.2%	8.8%
Met	20.5%	27.8%	25.1%	26.9%	27.8%
Approaching	20.5%	44.1%	47.9%	39.1%	40.6%
Below	20.5%	22.1%	23.8%	25.8%	22.8%

(Below, year-over-year change: +1.6 PTS, +1.7 PTS, +2.0 PTS, -3.0 PTS)

Source: TDOE, 2023

▶ Below ▶ Approaching ▶ Met ▶ Exceeded

The reality is, in many situations, following current Tennessee guidance around RTI[2] and HDT results in the state's most academically behind students not receiving deep, small-group support with the high-quality literacy materials adopted by districts. In fact, in the most intensive RTI[2] setting, known as Tier 3, districts are directed to offer intervention to students for nearly five hours a week — *almost an entire day of learning that does not leverage the adopted high-quality materials used in their building for core literacy instruction.*[17]

In the spring of 2022, a landscape analysis across the state of all Foundational Literacy Skills Plans (FLSPs) — *the document every district must make public outlining the materials and approach they use to support K-5 literacy instruction* — was published by the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Findings from this report support the conclusion that, while all districts report offering low-performing students increasingly intensive academic interventions, there is "significant variability in the amount of time devoted to foundational literacy skills as well as materials used for instruction and remediation."[18]

THE SYSTEM OF STUDENT ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN TENNESSEE

Tennessee's current approach to student academic support beyond core instruction asks school teams to leverage data to consider placement in one or more of the below structures. Moving from the "least intensive" to the "most intensive," these four structures are defined as:

- **Core Instruction:** An opportunity for all students to receive instruction aligned to Tennessee Academic Standards, including small-group support.[19]

- **High-Dosage Tutoring:** Small-group academic support with materials aligned to core instruction and focused on scaffolding academic content rather than remedial work.[20]

- **Response To Intervention And Instruction, RTI²:** A tiered "problem-solving model" that provides an ongoing process of instruction and intervention using intervention materials that must be matched to specific area(s) of deficit for a student.[21]

- **Special Education:** An intervention defined by individual student need where students must have access to high-quality, evidence-based instruction in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and guided by an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).[22]

The information below offers a summary of current Tennessee guidance driving district decision-making for students who need more support within these structures.

Program Element	HDT	RTI²	
		Tier 2	Tier 3
How should students be identified for support?	40th percentile or below on the universal screener with a focus on "approaching" students	Below the 25th percentile on the universal screener coupled with additional evidence or use of local, relative norms for a large number of students to serve*	
How should the support be staffed?	Adult who has completed Tennessee accelerating literacy and learning corps (TALLC) training	Highly trained personnel adequately trained to deliver the selected intervention, and taught by qualified, certified teachers, if possible	
What materials should be used?	High-quality materials aligned with classroom content	Systematic scientifically research-based interventions that target the student's identified area of deficit that produce reliable and valid results	
What is the maximum staff-to-student ratio for small-group support?	1:3	1:5	1:3
How frequently should small groups meet?	30-45 minutes two times weekly	30 minutes daily	Minutes daily, grades K-3 • Kindergarten: 40-45 • Grades 1-2: 40-60 • Grades 3: 45-60
How long does this support last?	One year of support (As outlined in the TN ALL Corps grant requirements)	No specified duration or number of progress monitoring data points before recommending a change in frequency of intervention sessions, interventions, provider, time of day, or for initiation of a special education referral	

*An updated version of the RTI² Framework made available in March 2023 removes specific cut-score guidance for placing students in Tier 2 and Tier 3. The RTI² Framework guidance from 2016 to February 2023 and TN Universal Reading Screener guidance is more prescriptive, identifying Tier 2 as students performing in the 11th-25th percentile range and Tier 3 students as those performing at or below the 10th percentile.[23]
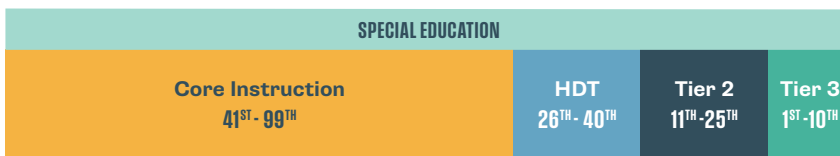
While special education settings represent "the most intensive intervention" for students, it is important to conceptualize special education services not as a specific place or designation assigned to students who score in the lowest percentile range on Tennessee's universal screeners. Instead, students identified for special education services have participated in formal assessment, received an eligibility diagnosis under one of Tennessee's 16 categories,[24] and demonstrated an academic need for specialized support.[25] Rather than the RTI^2 Framework being a pathway to special education eligibility, it is primarily intended to offer students a path back to core instruction and grade-level success.

Inaccurate View

| Core Instruction 41ST - 99TH | HDT 26TH - 40TH | Tier 2 11TH-25TH | Tier 3 1ST-10TH | SPECIAL EDUCATION |

Accurate View

SPECIAL EDUCATION

| Core Instruction 41ST - 99TH | HDT 26TH - 40TH | Tier 2 11TH-25TH | Tier 3 1ST-10TH |

Support decisions for students with IEPs in Tennessee are driven by a key principle from the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) known as Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), which guides educators in determining both **where** and **how** students are supported.[26]

- Students with IEPs should not be removed from the general education classroom unless it is determined that learning cannot be achieved even with the use of supplemental aids and services.

- Support for students with IEPs should align to two major categories such that they receive:

  ▶ **Accommodations** that adjust **how** they are taught or expected to learn without reducing learning expectations.

  ▶ **Modifications** that adjust **what** they are taught or expected to learn compared with their general education peers.[27]

In 2021, 13 percent of K-12 students in Tennessee were identified as having a disability[28] and only 1.4 percent of all students are assessed using MSAA/TCAP-Alt alternate state assessments at the end of the school year.[29] This means 99 percent of all K-12 students in Tennessee are held accountable to the same grade-level standards at the end of the year.

A NEW VISION FOR ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN EARLY GRADES LITERACY

Given current research on how students learn to read and the effectiveness of HDT, Tennessee has an opportunity to rethink how students experience academic support beyond core literacy instruction. Imagine a world where rather than asking struggling students to navigate between assessments and instructional programs that are out of step with their core literacy block, schools offer students more time and practice with aligned materials in a high-dosage tutoring structure.

At the beginning, middle, and end of the year, all students participate in universal literacy screeners, helping school teams identify who may need more support. All students also take diagnostic assessments aligned to the high-quality instructional materials used in core instruction. Results from these assessments are used to understand the extent to which students are on track in mastering the content they have experienced up to that point in the year. Where students have gaps, they receive support aligned to the two components of the simple view of reading: foundational skills instruction and knowledge building. In both cases, the content and assessments they experience between administrations of the universal literacy screeners are aligned to the high-quality instructional materials used in core instruction.

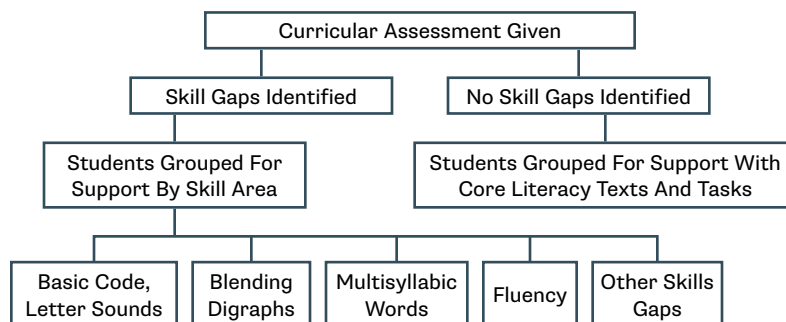## INTEGRATION OF UNIVERSAL SCREENER DATA AND A CONTENT-SPECIFIC VISION FOR INSTRUCTION

Universal Screener Information

Core Instruction Alone Decision | HDT Support Decision With Increasing Intensity

AND

A Content Specific Vision For Support That Leverages Assessments And Materials From Core Literacy HQIM

Curricular Assessment Given

Skill Gaps Identified | No Skill Gaps Identified

Students Grouped For Support By Skill Area | Students Grouped For Support With Core Literacy Texts And Tasks

Basic Code, Letter Sounds | Blending Digraphs | Multisyllabic Words | Fluency | Other Skills Gaps

First, where students demonstrate gaps in mastery of reading foundational skills **(learning to read the words on the page)** they receive targeted support in a high-dosage tutoring structure to master those skills — even if those skills are below grade level. The familiar skills practice routines, materials, and aligned instructional scope and sequence are the foundation of this support to ensure they do not inadvertently repeat skills they have already mastered or jump ahead to skills in a misaligned sequence from a different foundational skills program.

Where students do not demonstrate gaps in foundational skills but continue to struggle with grade-level literacy success, support focuses on reading comprehension **(understanding the words on the page)**. They spend time in high-dosage tutoring with the topics being discussed in core literacy instruction and increased time with the same complex texts and tasks from adopted materials to prepare them to engage in core instruction and develop grade-level proficiency in discussion and writing.

Beyond the content and assessments, schools operate from a new point of clarity around the structure and process that guide student academic support decisions. Specifically, high-dosage tutoring becomes the research-based **structure**[30] for small-group intervention; and Tennessee's RTI^2 Framework is understood as the **process** by which districts and schools make informed decisions about the frequency, intensity, and duration of student academic support in high-dosage tutoring, share updates with caregivers, and make referrals for special education services.

Districts and schools also serve more students through high-dosage tutoring as they reclaim staff capacity from structures like Tier 2 and Tier 3 and reclaim funds from discontinued use of misaligned assessments and materials. Certified general educators, certified special educators, and instructional support staff collaborate around student learning and progress monitoring in more coordinated ways and work to ensure all students are making progress toward grade-level literacy outcomes.

A TENNESSEE CASE FOR INSTRUCTIONAL COHERENCE IN EARLY GRADES LITERACY

During the 2022-23 school year, a group of four Tennessee districts sought support to consider how they might move beyond initial implementation of their newly established high-dosage tutoring programs to an approach that would sustain and integrate those programs into their overall academic vision for early literacy. To begin to work toward this goal, district efforts focused on:

- **Considering a new vision for student academic support in early grades literacy** that would be grounded in the research on reading, instructionally coherent to the assessments and materials from core instruction, and aligned to the research on high-dosage tutoring.

- **Developing foundational skills mastery trackers** aligned to the assessments and materials from core instruction to track student progress and facilitate collaboration between certified educators, tutors, and interventionists.

- **Designing and implementing a small instructional coherence pilot** to incorporate use of foundational skills diagnostics assessments, trackers, and content from high-quality instructional materials in HDT and a small subset of RTI[2] settings.

- **Analyzing student growth trends** using beginning, middle, and end-of-year results from adopted universal literacy screeners to understand differences in outcomes by intervention setting for students who started the year in different percentile performance ranges aligned to the guidance for HDT, RTI[2] Tier 2, and RTI[2] Tier 3.

While the spring instructional coherence pilots were very small, sometimes in just two classrooms in a single school, the overall differences in average student growth by academic support structure across the districts is already shedding light on the impact of instructionally coherent academic support for students.

CASE STUDY DATA

The four Tennessee districts in this case study tracked the average percentile growth made by 15,937 1st-3rd graders without IEPs and 3,048 with IEPs between the beginning, middle, and end-of-year administration windows using adopted universal literacy screeners over the course of the 2022-23 school year. The demographic profile of these four districts is similar to that of Tennessee as a whole.[31]

K-12 Student Demographic Information For Tennessee Overall As Compared To Four Case Studies Districts, 2022-23 School Year								
	Total Enrollment	Black	Hispanic	White	Other Race/ Ethnicity	Economically Disadvantaged	Students With Disabilities	English Learners
Tennessee	967,356	24%	13%	60%	3%	30%	13%	8%
Case Study Districts	114,987	21%	14%	62%	3%	24%	14%	8%

Critical to interpreting the outcomes of this analysis is understanding general implementation practices for academic support in the four districts. While a range of personnel support each structure (active and retired educators, paraprofessionals, volunteers, and newly hired employees serving as tutors), there are clear distinctions in content selection and scheduling between support settings.

- **Core Literacy Instruction:** All four districts use high-quality instructional materials and offer small-group support as a part of the core instructional block (groups of no more than six students for 15 minutes every other day).

- **High-Dosage Tutoring:** Two of the four districts use the exact same high-quality instructional materials from their core

instructional block. One of the districts uses Tennessee's Foundational Skills Curriculum Supplement (TNFSCS) and another uses a set of core instructional materials from Tennessee's approved adoption list. All four districts serve students in group sizes of no more than three and at the state required dosage (at least two times a week for 30 minutes each session). They all offer only in-person tutoring and most frequently during the school day.

- **RTI² Tier 2 and Tier 3:** All four districts use different intervention assessments and materials intended to address student specific skill deficits and work to adhere to the respective group size (1:5 and 1:3), frequency (daily), and duration (30-60 minutes) requirements for those structures.

While guidance exists for placement in RTI[2] or high-dosage tutoring aligned to certain cut scores on the universal screener, it is important to note this analysis was possible because districts ultimately have discretion on placement decisions.[32] They have also struggled to find capacity to support all students in Tier 2 and Tier 3 structures since starting RTI[2] in 2014-15, meaning even some of the lowest-performing students in these districts are not receiving small-group support outside of core instruction.

The ultimate variance in the content, structure, and support placement decision-making by the four districts provides an opportunity to analyze student growth across settings and hypothesize about the cause or causes behind the outcomes. Using the percentile range band placement guidance being followed at the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, we see the average percentile growth students without IEPs made using the composite score between the beginning and end-of-year administrations of the literacy universal screener. It is also important to note that two different universal literacy screeners are represented in this data, but individual district results were also calculated and show similar results.

Students Without IEPs: 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.

An analysis was also attempted using the same approach for students with IEPs; however, too few of them received support in a high-dosage tutoring structure to complete a robust analysis. For example, of the 1,957 students with IEPs who started the year in the 1st-25th percentile band, only 20 received high-dosage tutoring over the course of the year. More detailed results for students with IEPs highlight access trends across available academic support settings.

Students With IEPs: Average Composite Score Percentile Growth From Beginning To End Of Year					
Beginning-Of-Year Percentile Performance Range	All Students With IEPs	Core Literacy Instruction Only + IEP	HDT +IEP	RTI² Tier 2 +IEP	RTI² Tier 3 +IEP
1st-25th Percentile	.8*	0.7	6.2	3.7	2.4
26th-40th Percentile	1.8*	1.8	6.2	5.9	-5.8
41st-99th Percentile	-3.6*	-3.8	-4.6	2.0	-
1st-25th Percentile	1957	864	20	334	739
26th-40th Percentile	365	278	47	28	12
41st-99th Percentile	726	660	42	20	-

A total of 3,048 students with IEPs are included in this analysis. Only 109 of them in any percentile range received support in an HDT setting. There were no statistically significant results using a .05 level of significance.

CASE STUDY FINDINGS

While this analysis does not take into account the specific profile of each student or capture all the reasons a school team may have chosen a particular academic support structure over another, several important trends for early grades literacy support emerge.

1. **Students who started the year furthest behind** grew the most, on average, in a high-dosage tutoring structure that leveraged high-quality, core instructional materials.

2. **Students between the 11th-40th percentiles** also experienced more growth, on average, in a high-dosage tutoring structure that leveraged high-quality, core instructional materials or when placed in core instruction alone.

3. **Placement in RTI² Tier 3** resulted in an average decline in performance for students scoring above the 10th percentile and a similar rate of growth as placement in core instruction alone for students scoring below the 10th percentile.

4. **Students with IEPs** made less growth than their peers without IEPs in every performance band, on average, but participation rates in high-dosage tutoring for students with IEPs was too low for analysis — potentially signaling a barrier to access for this group of students.

In simple terms, this means that, for students who are furthest behind, learning could be maximized by providing them instructionally coherent small-group support through high-dosage tutoring — which takes 90 minutes per week compared to the 150-300 minutes currently allocated for Tier 2 and Tier 3 structures. Students with IEPs, specifically, should have access to HDT as a support structure to align to the principle of least restrictive environment in a schools' continuum of supports.

Findings from this case study have implications for strategies related to instruction, scheduling, staffing, funding, and future analysis.

- **For Instruction:** This analysis points schools and systems toward a support strategy for students that offers them more practice with the same high-quality materials from core instruction. This approach represents a large shift from the decade-long strategy in Tennessee to offer struggling students "something different" at the first point of weakness. The less intensive accommodation or "first step" may be simpler — offering additional time to succeed with the same materials.

- **For Scheduling:** In this analysis, students in HDT settings attended sessions two to three times a week for 30 minutes in groups of no more than three students — for a total of 60-90 minutes each week. On the other hand, these districts offered Tier 2 and Tier 3 support daily for 150 to 300 minutes per week. If schools shifted a majority of their academic support to an HDT structure, they would gain back 60 minutes a week from Tier 2 structures and 210 minutes a week from Tier 3. Time and staff capacity from these settings could be repurposed to create additional high-dosage tutoring groups for more students in a cost-effective way.

- **For Staffing:** The four districts in this case study used a wide range of staff to support students across academic support settings. The tutors in the HDT setting ranged from certified educators to paraprofessionals to newly hired part-time tutoring staff to volunteers. While this analysis did not investigate potential differences between tutor type, there may be opportunities to build expertise in early literacy instruction and high-quality materials across a range of roles. As this happens, schools will create instructional teams that have deep content knowledge of the same research-based approaches to reading instruction as well as knowledge of the high-quality instructional materials used in literacy. This will result in greater flexibility around who is able to support students or substitute in and out of various structures as needed to fill gaps or meet additional student needs.

- **For Funding:** Planning for sustainable funding of HDT is critical as TN ALL Corps Grant funding ends by the summer of 2024. The instructional, scheduling, and staffing implications from this analysis offer districts an opportunity to ease the transition away from TN ALL Corps Grants funds to other sources as they: 1) Save money through decreased or discontinued use of disconnected assessments and materials, 2) Increase access to high-dosage tutoring under current staffing models, and 3) Focus HDT supports for students who benefit the most from this approach.

- **For Further Analysis:** Tennessee has an opportunity to continue to investigate the impact of instructional coherence on student outcomes at these grade levels for a wide range of students — including students with and without IEPs as well as for multilingual learners. There is also an opportunity to understand the impact of increased instructional coherence for additional grade levels in literacy as well as in math.

A PATH FORWARD

Tennessee schools have an opportunity to imagine and create a world where every adult in a building who supports students with grade-level reading has a deep knowledge of the same high-quality instructional materials and assessments. In this new paradigm, all staff — certified general and special educators, interventionists, paraprofessionals, and tutors — are on the same page about how to help and monitor the progress of each student. For students, they experience coherent support from a team of adults who know exactly which foundational skills, topics, texts, and tasks students need to master to work toward grade-level literacy success.

While no single set of supports will meet the needs of every student, what follows is a set of recommendations for Tennessee that have the potential to put more students on a path to grade-level literacy success. These recommendations align to three major steps the state's leaders and decision-makers can take to rework Tennessee's approach to teaching its youngest and most academically behind students to read:

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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

EXPAND THE VISION

▶ **TDOE should establish, define, and share guidance that supports an instructionally coherent vision for student academic support in early grades literacy.** Tennessee has worked hard to implement strong early literacy policies that reflect the research on reading and require districts to adopt high-quality instructional materials. The state has also worked hard to design and implement an RTI[2] Framework, in place since 2014-15, intended to offer students intensive, small-group support. However, the guidance around how to support the state's lowest-performing students is creating missed opportunities to offer students coherent, deep support aligned to the high-quality instructional materials used in core literacy instruction.

Instead, an instructionally coherent vision for early grades literacy should include a set of decision-making guardrails that directly inform the student experience outside of core instruction with guidance that ensures academic support is:

- Grounded in the research on effective reading instruction, offering support through explicit and systematic foundational skills instruction and grade-level reading comprehension topics, texts, and tasks

- Aligned to the content and assessments from the high-quality instructional materials used in core instruction, such that:
  - » Foundational skills support follows the same scope and sequence, whether those skills are below grade level or on grade level
  - » Reading comprehension support focuses on the same grade-level topics, texts, discussion prompts, and writing tasks

- Staffed to ensure students receive support from someone who has received training on early literacy instruction and the high-quality instructional materials and assessments being used

- Prioritized for students who demonstrate the greatest academic need

REVISE THE FRAMEWORK

▶ **TDOE should share guidance that clarifies HDT as the research-based structure for small-group support beyond core literacy instruction and RTI[2] as the process that guides the decision-making.** HDT, RTI[2] Tier 2, and RTI[2] Tier 3 are all essentially small-group support structures outside of the core instructional block. However, Tennessee took an approach to guidance that defined HDT as a support for higher-performing students, leveraging core instructional materials, in groups of no more than three.[33] In contrast, Tennessee guidance encourages districts to place lower-performing students in RTI[2] Tier 2 and Tier 3 structures with specific intervention materials. In an effort to follow current RTI[2] Framework guidance, adhere to HDT requirements related to third-grade retention, and to secure funds through TN ALL Corps, districts feel the need to staff and offer multiple disconnected or misaligned supports to the same students, meaning that a student may be pulled for small-group Tier 2 support during the school day using one set of materials and then be pulled again for small-group support — this time labeled as HDT — after school using the materials from core instruction. This double-dip with different materials could create confusion for the student and it inherently limits the number of students who can receive support. There are also long-term funding implications around these terms given the direct student-level allocation for HDT included in Tennessee's new funding formula, the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA).[34] To clarify this funding source, districts need a clear vision for an HDT structure grounded in the research and clarity around how to determine the students who should receive that support — *which early evidence suggests should be the lowest-performing students.*

Student academic support guidance for early grades literacy in Tennessee should name HDT as the structure through which students receive small-group support beyond core instruction and define RTI[2] as the process for student identification, progress monitoring, caregiver notifications, decisions to increase or decrease the intensity of HDT, and decisions to refer students for formal evaluations for special education services.

▶ **The Tennessee State Board of Education (SBE) should ensure academic rules reflect the new framework for support that identifies HDT as the structure for small-group support and RTI[2] as the decision-making process.** As TDOE updates guidance around the relationship between HDT as the support structure and RTI[2] as the decision-making process, SBE should ensure that Tennessee requires an approach to HDT that aligns to the most recent research: a minimum of three sessions per week for 30 minutes (rather than the current guidance of two

times per week for 30 minutes) and a group size of no more than four students (rather than three) when certain criteria are in place.[35] As this research evolves, guidance and rules should follow to ensure schools are maximizing staff capacity and the impact of academic support for as many students as possible. Additionally, the SBE rule requiring implementation of the RTI[2] Framework should ensure districts have clarity to follow the processes included in that document while also identifying the small-group support students are receiving as HDT to ensure support and funding are allocated to the students who need it most.

▶ **TDOE should convene an Academic Support Working Group to guide revisions to the current RTI[2] Framework to align its contents to the new vision for instructional coherence and research on HDT in early grades literacy.** Moving towards an instructionally coherent vision and system for student academic support in early grades literacy should ultimately be captured in a revised framework document, similar to the current RTI[2] Framework. A diverse group of stakeholders — superintendents, RTI[2] and HDT coordinators, certified educators (general, special educators, and English-learner), interventionists, paraprofessionals, tutors, parents, students, and members of Tennessee's Dyslexia Advisory Council — should be engaged in a review to refine current guidance to ensure more students have access to the instructionally coherent support they need to achieve grade-level literacy success.[36] This working group should address a wide range of topics, including: assessment and progress monitoring guidance, data tracking best practices, understanding supplemental materials

offered by aligned high-quality instructional materials publishers, revising recommended intervention materials lists, planning for how to incorporate HDT into a continuum of supports that is also open to students with IEPs, ensuring appropriate identification and support for students with characteristics of dyslexia (and likely many other topics).

ALIGN THE SUPPORT

▶ **TDOE should audit the assessment items in adopted universal literacy screeners across grades K-3 to ensure they reflect instructional coherence with the state's Foundational Skills Curriculum Supplement (TNFSCS),** *with an urgent focus on kindergarten.* Tennessee has adopted a "sounds-first approach" to early literacy instruction and has created an aligned and free foundational skills program that schools can use as their core program for teaching reading. In this approach, for example, students learn to say the sound "mmmmm" when they see the letter "m" before they learn to say the name of the letter. Research has shown this approach is effective for accelerating reading skills in students as it avoids confusion with saying the letter name instead of the sound while learning to read.[37] Tennessee law also requires districts to administer a universal screener at the beginning, middle, and end of the year to monitor student performance in Tennessee against national norms and to identify students for academic support beyond core instruction.[38] By law, TDOE offers a free universal screener to districts, which nine out of 10 districts in the state use.[39]

However, in kindergarten, Tennessee's universal screener assesses students on their knowledge of letter names within the first seven weeks of school — before this skill is taught using the state's provided foundational skills materials.[40] As a result, students who have had less formal instruction on letter names prior to kindergarten will be at a distinct disadvantage when taking this assessment, the results of which may lead districts or schools to place students in academic support structures before they have had an opportunity to follow the scope and sequence of their high-quality instructional materials as intended. Tennessee should work to ensure alignment between kindergarten universal screener items and the scope and sequence of its adopted materials to ensure assessment practices do not create inequitable access to core instruction for the state's youngest learners. Universal screener items for first, second, and third grade should also be audited to ensure alignment to the state's foundational skills materials.

▶ **The Tennessee General Assembly should require TDOE to collect, analyze, and publicly share student growth trends for students receiving academic support outside of core literacy instruction — inclusive of HDT, RTI², and summer learning — to drive system improvement.** Currently, Tennessee does not publicly report on how students are identified for academic support in RTI² or HDT, the materials or assessments being used to support them, or the extent to which their outcomes are or are not improving over time. It is also unclear the frequency with which support through Tier 2 or Tier 3 results in a referral and eligibility for special education or transition back into a full-time core instruction placement and the amount of time students spend in any one setting before a referral is made. These additional elements could be incorporated by expanding reporting requirements for the Early Grades Reading Report as outlined in Tennessee Code Annotated 49-1-907.[41]

While the recommendations in this report are written to inform a statewide strategy, districts and schools already have discretion under the current RTI² Framework to make the student support placement decisions they believe are in the best interest of students based on data. Should leaders, educators, and RTI² school-based teams believe instructionally coherent academic support to be an effective strategy for any student, these recommendations can serve as a roadmap to inform next steps. Additionally, SCORE is pleased to share a set of K-3 Literacy Instructional Coherence Tools (grounded in the learnings from the districts featured in this report) to guide system and school-level planning.

RESOURCES

1   The Science of Reading. SCORE (Winter 2022).

2   Tennessee Makes Historic Gains in Third Grade Reading, Offers Strong Support for Students. TDOE (2023).

3   Response to Instruction and Intervention Framework (RTI²). Tennessee Department of Education (March 2023).

4   Instructional Coherence: A Key to High-Quality Learning Acceleration for All Students. TNTP (June 2022).

5   Response to Instruction and Intervention Framework (RTI²). TDOE (March 2023).

6   TCAP Spring 2021 District Level Results. TDOE (2021).

7   2021-22 State-Level TCAP Assessment Results – At a Glance. TDOE (2022).

8   TDOE Releases 2022-23 State-Level TCAP Results. (2023).

9   English Language Arts. Tennessee State Board of Education.

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13 Tutoring with TN ALL Corps – Guidance for Districts. TDOE (2021).

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15 2023 State of Education in Tennessee: A Stronger Path Forward. SCORE (2023).

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28 Tennessee School Report Card, State of Tennessee – About the State. TDOE (2022).

29 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and The One Percent Cap. TDOE (2017).

30 Designing Principles for Accelerating Student Learning with High-Impact Tutoring. EdResearch for Action (February 2021).

31 Data Downloads and Requests – Profile Data Files. TDOE (2022).

32 Response to Instruction and Intervention Framework (RTI²): TDOE (March 2023).

33 RTI² and High-Dosage, Low-Ratio Tutoring. TDOE (August 2022).

34 Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement Guide. TDOE (2023).

35 *High-Dosage Tutoring: A Proven Strategy to Accelerate Student Learning.* District of Columbia, Office of the State Superintendent of Education (March 2021).

36 Oxley, Diana, "Creating Instructional Program Coherence." Principal's Research Review, National Association of Secondary School Principals (September 2008).

37 Treiman, Rebecca, Sotak, Lia, and Margo, Bowman, "The roles of letter names and letter sounds in connecting print and speech." *Memory and Cognition* (2001).

38 SBE 0520-01-03-.15 (2021).

39 Olson, Lynn, "The Reading Revolution: How States Are Scaling Literacy Reform." FutureEd (June 2023).

40 TN Universal Reading Screener: 10. TDOE (September 2021).

41 TN Code § 49-1-907 (2021).

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