Policy Brief
Comprehensive Approach to Literacy Policy and Practice

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New Mexico began transitioning to a structured literacy approach in 2019, beginning with legislation (Laws 2019, Chapter 256) that required interventions for students showing characteristics of dyslexia and mandated the development of local literacy professional development plans. The Public Education Department (PED) launched Structured Literacy New Mexico in 2020 to support this legislation, with the goal of improving reading proficiency and reducing the number of students requiring special education services. This initiative is built around five components: science of reading training for teachers and administrators, assessment and monitoring of kindergarten through fifth grade (K-5) students, communication with communities and caregivers, high quality instructional materials (HQIM), and leadership development for teachers and administrators to support literacy instruction.

These reforms emerged in response to persistently low literacy rates and setbacks caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In recent years, educators and policymakers have sharpened their focus on early literacy, particularly reading proficiency by the end of third grade. Reading is a foundational skill essential to fully engage in learning and it is also linked to long-term benefits like increased earnings, better health outcomes, and reduced criminal behavior.
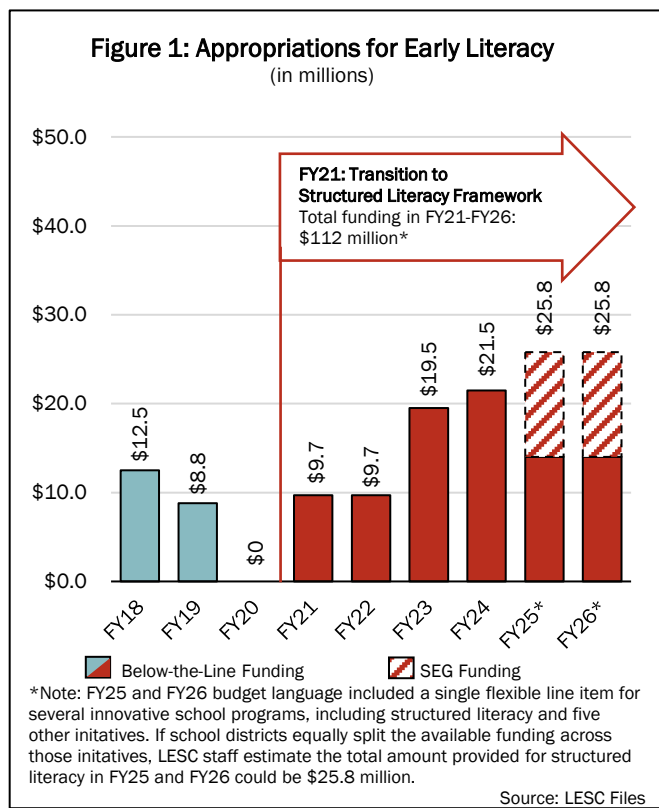
The Legislature's investment to transition to the structured literacy approach totaled $112 million from FY21 to FY26 (see **Figure 1: Appropriations for Early Literacy**). Achieving sustained improvements in reading outcomes will require continued investment and coordinated implementation across all components of the literacy system. This brief examines how literacy policies have been implemented across New Mexico, particularly in comparison with national early literacy initiatives, to highlight strengths and identify implementation gaps to ensure all New Mexico students gain equitable access to high-quality literacy instruction.

Policy Components in New Mexico

PED developed a set of policy tools and resources for school districts and charters schools as they moved forward in implementing the structured literacy approach. This included the Structured Literacy Instructional Material Review Rubric, which guides districts in selecting appropriate interventions for students exhibiting characteristics of dyslexia, and the New Mexico Statewide Literacy Framework, alongside the guiding document the Science of Reading for

Key Takeaways

- Investments for structured literacy have totaled $112 million from FY21-FY26 *(Page 1)*.

- Exposure to structured literacy practices may be driving gains in reading proficiency *(Page 3)*.

- There are five fundamental principles New Mexico may consider to build out a comprehensive early literacy policy *(Page 6)*.

Figure 1: Appropriations for Early Literacy
(in millions)

FY21: Transition to Structured Literacy Framework
Total funding in FY21-FY26: $112 million*

Below-the-Line Funding   SEG Funding

*Note: FY25 and FY26 budget language included a single flexible line item for several innovative school programs, including structured literacy and five other initatives. If school districts equally split the available funding across those initatives, LESC staff estimate the total amount provided for structured literacy in FY25 and FY26 could be $25.8 million.

Source: LESC Files

Emergent Bilinguals in New Mexico, both designed to help educators build a cohesive, research-based literacy system from birth to high school.

New Mexico's Statewide Literacy Framework underscores the importance of high-quality, culturally responsive instructional materials aligned to the science of reading; implementation of universal screening and tiered interventions through the multi-layered system of supports (MLSS); and sustained, evidence-based professional development. The core components listed below form the foundation of New Mexico's efforts to accelerate early literacy outcomes.

Local Literacy Plans

School districts and charter schools are required to develop a literacy professional development plan that includes detailed implementation of structured literacy training and evidence-based interventions. PED requires all local education agencies (LEAs) to update their literacy plans every two years and has provided templates for K-5 literacy plans that align with MLSS. Local literacy plans include screening for all first-grade students during the first 40 days of instruction, or within two weeks of enrolling administered only at the beginning of the year. PED currently has two approved English screeners, Teach Me to Read and Lexercise. Both Teach Me to Read and Lexercise are designed to be completed in five to 10 minutes.

High Quality Instructional Materials

PED prioritizes HQIM for all New Mexico students and teachers by facilitating a rigorous, evidence-based, and transparent review process. The adoption of HQIM involves New Mexico educators and content specialist reviewing and identifying instructional materials that are culturally and linguistically responsive for students and educators. This process ensures alignment to state academic content and performance standards in supporting students to meet or exceed grade-level goals, and to ensure HQIM are accessible to every student. Research shows students learn primarily through their interactions with teachers and content, but not all students have the same access to HQIM, and this reinforces opportunity gaps. School districts and charter schools in New Mexico have the flexibility to not buy from PED's vetted list, but are encouraged to select materials that satisfy local, cultural, and fiscal needs. As a result, 54 percent of New Mexico school districts have purchased HQIM for all grade levels kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) in English language arts (ELA), revealing an unclear picture of school district behavior, with some indicators demonstrating a growing alignment with the state's emphasis on evidence-based, culturally responsive instruction while others suggest more students need access to HQIM.

Professional Training and Learning

The Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training provides sustained and job-embedded science of reading professional development to support evidence-based reading instruction, improve grade-level reading proficiency, and close achievement gaps across the state. All New Mexico elementary school educators are required to complete professional development in the science of reading and structured literacy. As of FY22, PED reported 8,992 teachers had completed, or were enrolled in, LETRS training. A 2025 statutory amendment to educator preparation programs (Laws 2025, Chapter 149) now requires the use of structured literacy practices in training future educators and identifies structured literacy as the primary approach to teaching literacy for all learners. Further provisions specify literacy instruction for English learners must include evidence-based practices for biliteracy, differentiation, and culturally and linguistically responsive education.

Multi-Layered Systems of Support

The MLSS framework is a coordinated, statewide initiative designed to enhance student outcomes by integrating data-driven and tiered academic and behavioral support into everyday school practices (see **Table 1: New Mexico Multi-Layered System of Supports**). Teachers and school district leaders can identify and address student needs through universal screening and ongoing progress monitoring, family partnerships, and reduced administrative barriers. The origins of MLSS were developed in response to a growing concern that educators and administrators did not have a comprehensive framework for providing students with holistic

Table 1: New Mexico Multi-Layered System of Supports

| Layer 1	Students receive culturally responsive instruction and screening.
Layer 2	Students receive targeted, evidence-based interventions in small groups with ongoing progress monitoring.
Layer 3	Students received individualized support, including family engagement and intervention team meetings.

Source: PED

academic, behavior, and wellness supports in a timely manner. MLSS emphasizes personalized, evidence-based interventions delivered at increasing levels of intensity and is supported by student assistance teams. High-dosage tutoring and high-impact tutoring, both layer two academic supports in the MLSS framework, provide additional targeted instruction for reading, literacy, and math using HQIM before, during, and after school.

Model and Support Schools

Schools in New Mexico that showcase exemplary literacy instruction based on structured literacy are considered model schools. Model schools are identified through a competitive application process, including a site-visit, and should demonstrate effective strategies for teaching all students. Support schools are selected based on the availability of literacy coaches, but selection also requires a competitive application process. Model and support schools both receive assistance implementing the structured literacy approach and all K-5 educators in both model and supports schools must be LETRS trained or currently enrolled in LETRS training. Additionally, teachers and administrators must sign a written agreement acknowledging the requirements of structured literacy support schools, including monthly progress monitoring and reading challenges.

Funding for model and support schools differs based on grant amount and professional development. Model schools receive the highest level of support from the state, including an on-site structured literacy coach, additional online curriculums from iStation, professional development embedded in structured literacy and evidence-based practices, and a $50 thousand grant. Support schools receive moderate levels of support, including access to a structured literacy coach to support the implementation of structured literacy.

Impact of Structured Literacy in New Mexico. In a recent [evaluation](#) of the structured literacy initiative, LESC staff found both model and support schools serve higher proportions of students with disabilities, students from economically disadvantaged families, and students who are identified as English language learners. Furthermore, given their higher levels of need, students in these schools outperformed their predicted proficiency trajectories in the 2023-2024 school year (SY24). LESC's review of the structured literacy initiative demonstrated promising early results, suggesting exposure to structured literacy may be driving gains. **Figure 2: Trends in K-3 Reading Assessments**, shown below, represents positive statewide ELA trends for K-3 proficiency. Since 2022, the percentage of students on benchmark in kindergarten through second grade (K-2) has increased by 9 percentage points. A modest increase in third-grade ELA proficiency in 2024 indicates possible initial disruptions in implementation as schools adjusted to new instructional methods.

Figure 2: Trends in K-3 Reading Assessments
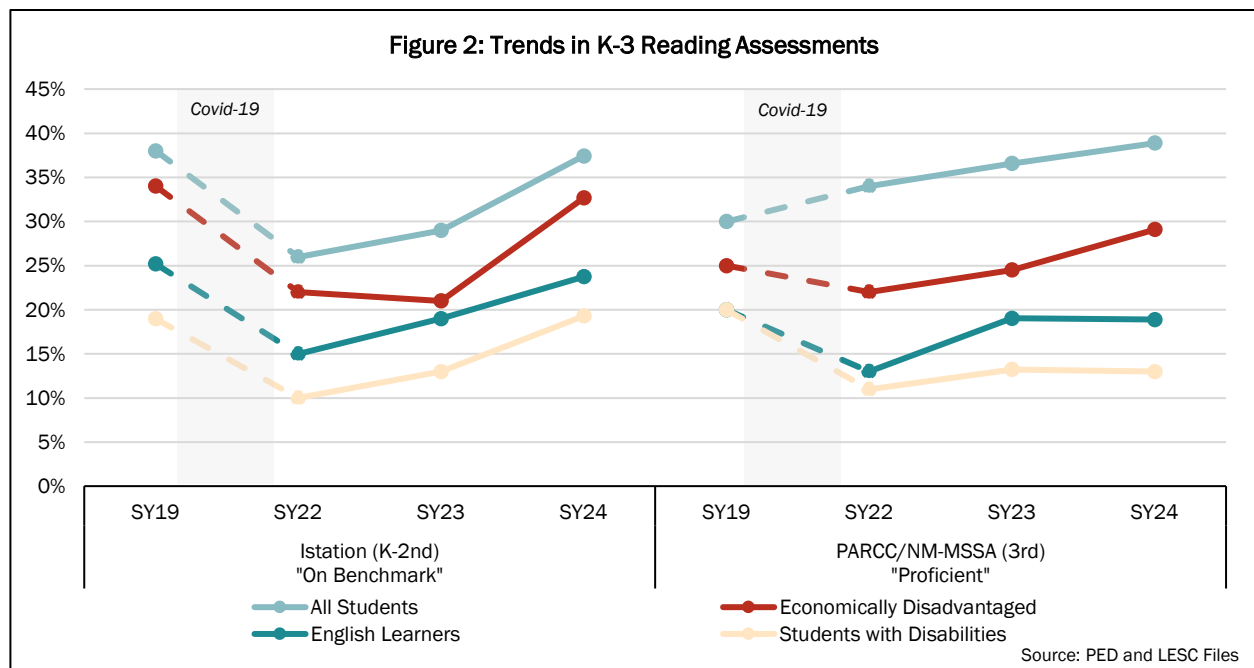
Policy Components Nationwide

States across the nation have implemented comprehensive K-3 literacy policies focused on five pillars: early identification, parent involvement, teacher training, intensive interventions and third grade retention as a last resort. These comprehensive K-3 reading policies are an effort to ensure all students read on grade level by the end of third grade, a critical benchmark for future academic and life success. **Table 2: Early Literacy Policy State Comparison**, shown below, provides a summary of common elements of literacy policy in New Mexico and other states.

Table 2: Early Literacy Policy State Comparison

States	Scope	Professional Development	Interventions	Monitoring	Parental Notification
Alabama (2019)	K-3	K-3 Science of Reading (SOR) Aligned training	Annual K-3 screening; Individual Reading Plans; Targeted Interventions	Standing Task Force	Individual Reading Plans
Colorado (2012)	K-3	K-3 SOR Aligned Training	Annual K-3 screening; READ Plan	Colorado Department of Education	READ Plan
Louisiana (2019)	K-3	K-3 SOR Aligned Training	Individual Reading Plan; Individual Academic Support Plan; Literacy Coach in Every K-3 School; Tiered Interventions and Curricular Overview	Louisiana Early Literacy Commission (2019); Louisiana Literacy Advisory Commission (2023)	Guidance for Family Engagement
Mississippi (2013)	K-3	K-3 SOR Aligned Training	Intensive Interventions, Reading Plan; Literacy Coaches in Every K-3 School	Mississippi Reading Panel	K-3 Promotion Requirements; Notification of Student Deficiencies and Progress
New Mexico (2019)	K-5	K-3 SOR Aligned Training	1st grade dyslexia screening; High Dosage Tutoring; Summer Reading Camp	Public Education Department	Special Education Evaluation

Source: LESC Analysis

State Policy Profiles

The Alabama Literacy Act, enacted in 2019, is the state's comprehensive approach to ensure every K-3 student in Alabama is supported to master foundational reading skills by grade four. Alabama's law mandates science-based reading programs across the state, comprehensive LETRS training for all K-3 teachers, and strict preparation in EPPs. It also institutes a multi-step intervention system for students at risk for retention by requiring enrollment in summer reading camps, with the opportunity to be reassessed, and review of reading portfolios by teachers and principals to initiate a good cause exemption. Alabama has increased funding to support school-based reading coaches, summer reading camps, formative assessments and screeners to identify struggling readers and track their progress.

The Mississippi Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA), enacted in 2013, ensures district school board policies facilitate reading instruction and intervention services to address student reading needs and that each student and their parents are informed of the student's reading progress. The Mississippi Department of Education provides support and guidance for all K-3 literacy instruction by providing an approved list of valid assessment systems, professional development for K-3 educators, job embedded and on-site coaching for K-3 reading teachers, and EPP requirements to prepare teacher candidates with effective foundation reading skills and interventions that support struggling readers. School districts are required to adopt HQIM, provide reading interventions to each K-3 student exhibiting reading deficiencies, create a reading deficiency and improvement plan, notify parents of proposed interventions and strategies for parental support at home, and provide summer reading camps for all third-grade students at risk for retention. The Mississippi Legislature also requires third-grade students to demonstrate readiness for promotion to the fourth grade and requires intensified intervention services for incoming third-grade students identified to have reading deficiencies.

Louisiana's Comprehensive Literacy Plan is a series of literacy policies, beginning in 2019, with a focus on literacy goals, explicit instruction, interventions and extension, professional development, and family

engagement. In 2019, Louisiana created its Early Literacy Commission that is charged with making recommendations to the Louisiana Department of Education and the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education on best practices for implementing effective, evidence-based reading instruction for children from early childhood through third grade. In 2021, science of reading training was mandated for all K-3 teachers, a single universal literacy screener was required three times a year for all K-3 students (including reporting requirements for students with dyslexia), and literacy vouchers for tutoring were offered to families. In 2022, Louisiana banned three-cueing instructional practices, adjusted reporting criteria requirements for students with dyslexia, implemented an individual reading improvement plan, dispatched literacy coaches in every K-3 school, and incorporated examination requirements for teacher licensure. In 2023, Louisiana prohibited the promotion of third-grade students identified to have reading deficiencies, while also creating criteria for good cause exemptions, and required EPPs to provide dyslexia training for certification.

The Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act, enacted in 2012, focuses on K-3 literacy development, literacy assessment, and individual intervention plans (READ plan) to ensure early reading progress is on track by third grade and that school districts are helping the state's most struggling readers. Colorado's law mandates all school districts to screen K-3 students within 90 days of enrollment and to develop an intervention plan with parents for students identified as having a significant reading deficiency. In addition to individual reading plans, LEAs must submit a report to the Colorado Department of Education about the status and progress of students with reading deficiencies, including details about which interventions are used and are expected to use in their school improvement plan. Further amendments in 2021 and 2022 include a new instructional programming review process, which creates a list of recommended evidence-based core supplement, intervention instructional plan, and professional development; a requirement that districts submit school improvement plans; a requirement for students with significant reading deficiencies to be enrolled in a daily literacy block; and mandatory evidence-based training for all K-3 teachers and other fourth- through 12th-grade teachers that work with struggling readers.

Variation in Early Literacy Policy Implementation

Common Components Across States. New Mexico's literacy policy components show strong alignment with other states' emphasis on strategic literacy training and instruction. Each state's literacy policy mandates a new teaching method concentrated in scientifically based reading instruction and reinforced through licensure examinations, literacy coaches, and research-based instructional materials. These layers of support ensure accountability in measuring student progress with efficient methods for screening and initiating effective interventions. In addition to training educators and supporting sustainable interventions for struggling readers, these policies aim to combine accountability and support to transform how literacy instruction can improve literacy outcomes. Most policies provide guidance and recommendations for literacy instructional materials and assessments to track student progress. Most policy plans also incorporate parent engagement with respect to notification of reading deficiencies or strategies to use at home to facilitate reading skills.

Key Differences in Implementation. Early screening methods for dyslexia and other reading deficiencies are a common priority among each state; however, the components of each policy create distinctions in the infrastructure for improving student literacy levels. Most notably, retention and promotion policies differ for each state. Mississippi and Alabama mandate retention for third-grade students that fall short of grade level proficiency, while Colorado and Louisiana remain flexible on such a mandate and rely more on interventions and parent collaboration for fourth grade promotion. Furthermore, the oversight of implementation and guidance differs for each state. For example, Mississippi published its LBPA Implementation Guide detailing precisely what the new law dictates, the roles and responsibilities for putting each component into practice, and a clear guide about what needs to happen at the state, district, school, and individual teacher level. This outline of roles and responsibilities has improved the understanding of the new teaching methods and facilitation with educator coaching, but more importantly, measures student progress with clarity. A robust implementation plan and monitoring system can improve the ecosystem of school leaders to consult and implement the law.

ExcelinEd's Approaches to Implementing Early Literacy Policies. ExcelinEd, a national nonprofit organization that conducts research on how policies translate to rising academic achievement, also offers analysis of comprehensive early literacy policies nationally. ExcelinEd's comprehensive approach to improving literacy outcomes includes strategies that support teachers, administrators, students, parents, and families. This comprehensive approach incorporates early literacy screenings and regular progress monitoring, ensures teachers are equipped to deliver scientifically based reading instruction, assesses how parents are equipped to

support their child, and ensures students who read severely below grade level receive intensified interventions from highly effective teachers. A 2025 analysis of nationwide policies from ExcelinEd revealed shared challenges when adopting comprehensive approaches to early literacy: insufficient teacher support, inconsistent implementation, inadequate accountability, funding allocations, and miscommunication between stakeholders.

The 50-state analysis from ExcelinEd reviewed 18 components under four categories: supports for teachers and policy implementation, assessment and parent notification, instruction and intervention, retention and intensive interventions. ExcelinEd's analysis of New Mexico's policy revealed five principles not adopted in policy: eliminating three-cueing instructional materials, parent read-at-home plans, retention at third grade, multiple options for promotion, and a good cause promotion for some students. See **Table 3: New Mexico's Implementation Report** for more detail.

Table 3: ExcelinEd's Report on New Mexico's Literacy Implementation

Supports for Teachers and Policy Implementation		Instruction and Intervention	
Science of Reading Training	✓	Guidance for District Adoption of High-Quality Instruction Materials	✓
Literacy Coach	✓	Elimination of Three-Queuing Instructional Methods	
Educator Preparation Program Alignment	✓	Individual Reading Plan	✓
Educator Preparation Program Assessment	✓	Regularly Monitor Student Progress	✓
Funding for Literacy Efforts	✓	Evidence-Based Interventions	✓
		Summer Reading Camps	✓
		Parent Read at Home Plan	
Assessment and Parent Notification		Retention and Intensive Intervention	
Universal Reading Screener	✓	Initial Determinant for Retention at Third Grade	
Screener for Characteristics of Dyslexia	✓	Multiple Options for Promotion	
Parental Notification of Student Progress	✓	Good Cause Exemptions for Students	

Source:ExcelinEd Policy Toolkit, February 2025

Senate Bill 242

Senate Bill 242 (SB242), Advancing the Science of Reading Act, introduced during the 2025 legislative session, would have required New Mexico's educator preparation programs (EPPs) to incorporate science of reading instruction so that future teachers are trained in scientifically based reading instruction. SB242 also would have prohibited the use of balanced literacy in New Mexico public schools, state agencies, and other organizations receiving state funding, and required the utilization of HQIM in prekindergarten through 12th grade public schools.

These proposed measures were intended to ensure pre-service teacher candidates graduate with the skills and knowledge needed to be effective teachers so students receive high-quality literacy instruction. Additional provisions proposed included consistent parental notification, development of student intervention plans, and progress monitoring for students exhibiting characteristics of dyslexia.

This act would have built on existing efforts to implement structured literacy in New Mexico by prioritizing the skills and knowledge for teachers to fully implement science of reading instruction that maximize student achievement. SB242 was amended numerous times and eventually passed in the Senate with a 32-6 vote. The bill was tabled in the House, but components of the bill related to EPPs were included in Laws 2025, Chapter 149 (House Bill 156, Increase Educational Salaries).

Laws 2025, Chapter 149 raised the minimum salaries for teachers while also including provisions for EPPs to teach scientifically-based reading instruction and require at least 100 hours of supervised field experience in public school classrooms for elementary teacher candidates.

Comprehensive Early Literacy Policy in New Mexico

New Mexico has made considerable progress in elementary reading proficiency through its structured literacy initiative. Substantial investments for comprehensive teaching training, the use of HQIM, and targeted school support for students are building the foundation for literacy achievement. Further, early positive results among model and support schools also show promise. Despite this progress, implementation varies across the state and increased coordination of efforts to address implementation gaps could be beneficial.

Supports for Teachers and Policy Implementation. According to ExcelinEd's evaluation, New Mexico has partially adopted principles to support teachers and state policy implementation. See **Table 3: ExcelinEd's Implementation Report on New Mexico's Literacy Implementation.** Since the transition to the Structured Literacy Initiative in 2019, the Legislature has allocated funding for structured literacy directly to school districts and charter schools. The FY25 SEG allocation included $59 million for districts and schools to not only fund structured literacy supports, but also fund teacher mentorship requirements, create an educational plan, provide career and technical education programs, and implement the community school framework. This means in FY25, school districts and charters schools could spend between $0 and $59 million of their SEG allocation to support structured literacy. PED's statewide adoption trained approximately 8,992 teachers and administrators in the science of reading, required the Praxis elementary reading exam for licensure, and most recently aligned EPPs to the structured literacy practices and scientifically based reading instruction to train educators. ExcelinEd analysis recommends a literacy coach trained in the science of reading be assigned to each elementary school to sustain professional development and coaching for K-3 teachers.

Assessment and Parent Notification. PED's Statewide Literacy Framework ensures all literacy instruction is evidence-based and provides guidance on universal screening for first-grade students, early interventions for students displaying characteristics of dyslexia, and implementation of a literacy professional development plan. ExcelinEd rates New Mexico's assessment and parent notification components as partially implemented, and recommends New Mexico expand universal reading screening to all K-3 students, require the dyslexia screener to be administered at the end of kindergarten and the beginning of first and second grade, and require parent notification of students identified with reading difficulties within 30 days of each administration of the state-approved universal reading screener.

Instruction and Intervention. State law requires current elementary schools and EPPs to teach the science of reading and implement a structured literacy approach. PED also prioritizes the adoption and implementation of HQIM and requires frequent monitoring of student progress. PED also introduced its MLSS framework for delivering proactive, data-driven academic and behavioral support across three layers of intensity along with a free summer reading program for all kindergarten through grade eight (K-8) students. ExcelinEd's analysis identified three components (elimination of three-cueing instructional materials, individual reading plans, and a parent read-at-home plan), to strengthen instruction and intervention in New Mexico. ExcelinEd's analysis recommends PED provide guidance in adopting interventions that are vetted and grounded in the science of reading, specify strategies for parents beginning read-at-home plans, and the creation of individual reading plans that monitor implementation, timeline, and parent involvement.

Retention and Intervention. Recent evaluations of early literacy policies, including retention, show states with a comprehensive early literacy policy experience substantial and sustained increases in reading scores. For example, Mississippi targeted literacy efforts from several vantage points, including retention, and experienced a surge in fourth grade reading proficiency. States like Mississippi, whose policies mandate third grade retention, see significant and persistent increases in state-summative readings scores. Recent research, however, has found these increases are largely attributable to the increased supports students receive rather than the practice of grade retention itself. A 2025 study of Michigan's third grade retention policy, for example, recommended decoupling increased literacy supports from retention. In 2023, Michigan removed the retention portion of its state law on literacy, but retained its use of interventions and supports.

In New Mexico, state law (see Section 22-2C-6 NMSA 1978) already requires parental notification of a student not academically proficient no later than the second grading period of the school year to discuss possible remediation programs available to assist the student in grades one through eight in becoming academically proficient. Remediation strategies and academic improvement plans include tutoring, extended day or week programs, summer programs, or other research-based interventions. All students in first through seventh grade have three options dependent on their academic proficiency: 1) the student is academically proficient and enters

the next higher grade; 2) the student is not academically proficient and shall participate in remediation programs and upon completion with academic proficiency may enter the next higher grade; 3) The student is not academically proficient and at the recommendation of the teacher and school principal shall be retained in the same grade for no more than one year with an academic improvement plan or promoted to the next grade if the parent refuses retention.

ExcelinEd recommends New Mexico require intensive interventions and good cause exemptions that focus on early literacy to strengthen retention and interventions policies. This policy should include at least three pathways for promotion to fourth grade, a predetermined achievement level on state reading assessment or an alternative assessment, and qualifications for a good cause exemption. A good cause exemption recognizes the special needs of some students with disabilities, English learners, and students who were previously retained. Research on comprehensive policies, including retention, find positive spillover effects on math achievement and reduced socioeconomic and racial high-stakes achievement gaps in reading. As New Mexico already has state law on this topic, it could be leveraged to better support students in alignment with national policy recommendations.

Policy and Budget Recommendations

Based on analysis of New Mexico's literacy efforts to date, alongside review of national research and policy considerations, this brief offers the following policy and budget recommendations for lawmakers to consider.

The Legislature should...

- Continue funding and support for structured literacy so that all schools use a research-based approach to reading instruction. Although funding to date has largely been used to train teachers, the state's literacy effort will require ongoing maintenance and resources to sustain its effectiveness.

- Consider funding additional instructional coaches to provide appropriate services to schools to achieve sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused approach for students.

The Public Education Department should...

- Provide detailed guidance for all programmatic efforts in structured literacy to ensure successful statewide implementation.

- Provide screening criteria and assessment tool overview that is feasible for administrative time, format, and language.

School Districts and Charter Schools should...

- Develop a "read-at-home" plan and provide tools for families to support literacy outside the classroom.

- Adopt HQIM to guide teachers and support learning for all students and provide ongoing training and guidance about the use of HQIM alongside other instructional materials to improve literacy instruction for all students.

- Establish reasonable thresholds and processes for K-3 intensive interventions and potential retention policies to ensure students acquire the reading skills needed to be promoted to the next grade level.