

# The Literacy Plan

## Prioritizing Student Success Through Literacy Achievement

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## Executive Summary

### **The role of the local school board is to create the conditions for student achievement.**

Data and experience prove that student achievement hinges on a mastery of literacy skills. Beyond the functional level, literacy plays a vital role in transitioning to adulthood and helps students become socially engaged members of society who can achieve occupational and economic success.

### **Effective local school boards can positively impact student achievement.**

Research by the National School Boards Association's Center for Public Education shows how local school boards in high-achieving districts exhibit habits and characteristics that are very different from boards in low-achieving districts. For example, boards in high-achieving districts are data-savvy; they are more likely to engage in goal setting and monitor the progress.<sup>1</sup>

### **Illiteracy will deleteriously affect people and negatively impact the greater community.**

The U.S. Department of Education reports about 130 million adults (ages 16 and up) read below a sixth-grade level. Per their guides, adults who are considered fully literate are scored at a Level 3, meaning they can infer complex meanings and ideas from written sources. Levels below that are partially illiterate. Below Level 1 is considered functionally illiterate.

### **In Clark County, only 37% of adults are proficient at working with information and ideas in text, compared to 46% nationally.<sup>3</sup>**

Literacy and earning potential are strongly linked. The average annual income for adults at Level 1 literacy level is just over \$34,000. By contrast, adults who score at or below Level 3 earn nearly \$63,000. If all adults could move up to at least the minimum literacy proficiency, it would generate an extra \$2.2 trillion in annual income for the country. States that have a disproportionate share of adults with low literacy levels would gain the most economically from increasing literacy skills.<sup>4</sup>

**Nevada  
is the  
8th  
least-  
literate  
state in  
the U.S.<sup>2</sup>**

**In Clark  
County,  
27% of  
adults are  
considered  
“illiterate.”<sup>3</sup>**

1. <https://www.nsba.org/-/media/NSBA/File/cpe-eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards-report-december-2019.pdf>

2. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/us-literacy-rates-by-state>

3. <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/>

4. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnietzel/2020/09/09/low-literacy-levels-among-us-adults-could-be-costing-the-economy-22-trillion-a-year/?sh=556fe1c54c90>

## **The Role of the School Board**

In Nevada, the local school board is responsible for setting policy standards to ensure all students receive equal and equitable access to high-quality education in a safe, respectful, and culturally responsive environment. Our role is to create the conditions for student achievement and be the voice of the community inside the walls of public education.<sup>5</sup>

There are a few essential keys to unlocking student success, and I find none of them more important than mastery of fundamental literacy skills. Above all else, literacy is a constitutional right afforded to every American. Reading and writing are the tools of effective communication, learning, and personal growth; literacy is the foundation for a successful life, in and out of school.<sup>6</sup>

## **By the end of third grade, 74% of struggling readers won't ever catch up**

Reading is essential for learning. Up through third grade, students learn to read, but from fourth grade on, students read to learn. Only one in every three students can read proficiently by that point. Without a strong foundation in reading, children are left behind in every class, year after year; they struggle because more than 85% of the curriculum is taught by reading. In fact, one of the most important predictors of graduating from high school is reading proficiently by the end of third grade.<sup>7</sup>

The Iowa Association of School Boards reported in its Lighthouse Study that school boards in high-achieving districts are “far more knowledgeable about teaching and learning issues” than boards in low-achieving districts. Boards in high-achieving districts, according to the study, are also much more likely to use “data and other information on student needs and results to make decisions.”<sup>8</sup>

## **Nevada ranks 42nd in childhood literacy, 43rd in adult literacy, and sits below the national literacy average at 83.9%<sup>9</sup>**

It is vital that school board members understand the myriad issues surrounding illiteracy and how prioritizing literacy skills will positively impact our students and Clark County. The Clark County School District (CCSD) trustees must prioritize their duties regarding student literacy achievement, ensure the data supports continuous literacy improvement, and ensure all students graduate with the necessary literacy skills to succeed in life.

5 [https://doe.nv.gov/State\\_Board\\_of\\_Education](https://doe.nv.gov/State_Board_of_Education)

6 <https://www.opn.ca6.uscourts.gov/opinions.pdf/20a0124p-06.pdf>

7 <https://www.readingfoundation.org/third-grade-reading-matters>

8 [https://media.carnegie.org/filer\\_public/fe/65/fe658e70-c6bf-41fb-b525-3de819c271ed/ccny\\_grantee\\_2006\\_next.pdf](https://media.carnegie.org/filer_public/fe/65/fe658e70-c6bf-41fb-b525-3de819c271ed/ccny_grantee_2006_next.pdf)

9 <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/us-literacy-rates-by-state>

## The Literacy Plan

School boards that set high and measurable goals toward improving literacy, developing policies, and allocating resources to promote literacy for all students are setting the scene for student achievement and success. The CCSD school board needs to set high literacy standards using a rigorous literacy curriculum and high-quality teacher mentoring and training in literacy topics.

These **seven literacy goals** will improve the effectiveness of our school board and lead to positive outcomes for all CCSD students:

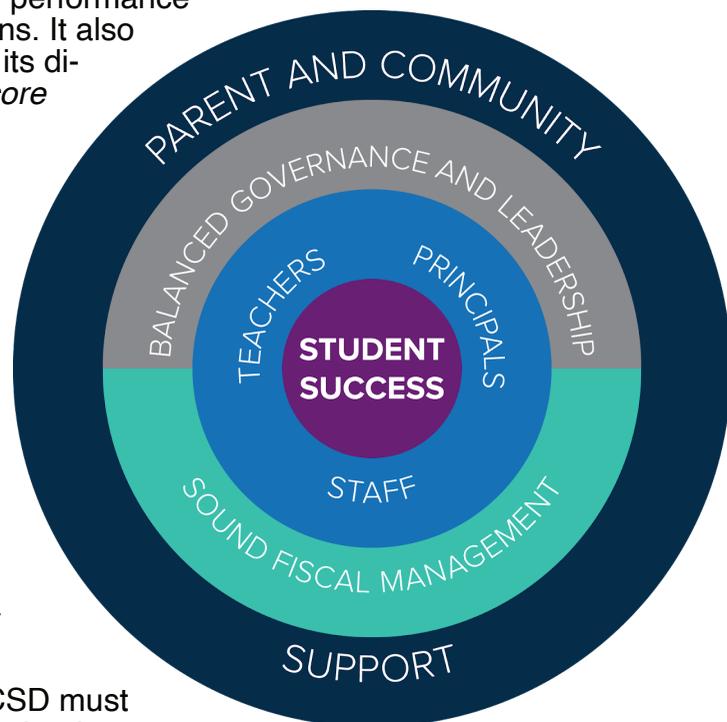
1. **Make literacy a district-wide priority**
2. **Identify students' literacy needs**
3. **Support scientifically proven literacy programs**
4. **Align district resources**
5. **Provide effective professional development**
6. **Evaluate and continually assess literacy program performance**
7. **Cultivate community support**

### 1. Make Literacy a District-Wide Priority

CCSD's five-year strategic plan, **Focus: 2024**, prioritizes student academic performance and success. It outlines how the District will strategically invest in people and cyclically monitor progress using key performance indicators (KPIs) to inform their actions. It also uses a bulls-eye graphic to visualize its directive that "*student success is our core business.*"<sup>10</sup>

Focus: 2024 was written in 2019. At that time, the National Assessment of Education Progress, popularly known as The Nation's Report Card, reported that CCSD students who performed at or above the "proficient level" were 30%. Black students' average score was 31 points *lower*, and Hispanic students averaged 19 points *lower* than white students' scores. Scores for students eligible for the National School Lunch Program averaged 22 points lower than those who don't receive a free or reduced lunch.<sup>11</sup>

To realize all-student success, CCSD must prioritize literacy, provide critical infrastructure support, and support leadership through resource allocation. This means putting in place systems and processes for anticipating and addressing school staffing, instruction, and organization needs in a timely, efficient, and effective way.



10. <https://newsroom.ccsd.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Focus-2024.pdf>

11. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/dst2019/pdf/2020016xx4.pdf>



**“The most important question in any organization has to be ‘what is the business of our business?’ Answering this question is the first step in setting priorities. If this is the case, educators must begin by asking: ‘Why are we here?’”<sup>12</sup>**

12. <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/18221964-simplifying-response-to-intervention-four-essential-guiding-principles>

## 2. Identify Literacy Needs

Prioritizing literacy will require weekly progress monitoring for most students in CCSD. Progress monitoring can give teachers information that helps students learn more and learn faster and help educators make better decisions about the type(s) of instruction that will work best for each child.

Progress monitoring is crucial when the District plan has measurable goals, clear action steps, and supports in place for accurate tracking and reporting. When there are explicit expectations that schools will develop literacy improvement plans to address each of the areas outlined in the District plan, there must be consistent help and resources given in real-time to each school to accomplish those goals.

By ensuring all students receive a high level of instruction, per the Focus: 2024 plan, combined with consistent and accurate progress monitoring, our District can decrease student proficiency gaps and increase access and equity to rigorous curriculum and instruction standards for all students. And, not surprisingly, for all of this to work, it must begin with learning how to read.

**Literacy and communication go hand in hand. Students who are falling behind their peers in reading may find themselves struggling to understand instructions in different disciplines.<sup>13</sup>**

## 3. Support Scientifically Proven Literacy Programs

Our schools use evidence-based instructional strategies and resources that ***ensure all students are progressing.***

## The Science of Reading

As the District develops a formal and comprehensive K-12 literacy plan to meet the needs of all students, it should be based on the overwhelming research supporting the science of reading.

The science of reading simply refers to the idea that students should learn to read in a method that achieves reading as the end goal for all students. It provides explicit, research-based instruction in:<sup>14 15</sup>

- ▶ Phonemic awareness
- ▶ Phonics
- ▶ Spelling
- ▶ Vocabulary
- ▶ Fluency
- ▶ Comprehension

13. <https://online.tamui.edu/articles/education/importance-of-literacy-and-reading.aspx>

14. <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf>

15. <https://www.readnaturally.com/research/5-components-of-reading>

However, the phrase “ensure all students are progressing” can be precarious, even when thoughtfully considered.

Unfortunately, achievement gaps and educational inequities exist, among different student groups, such as those with disabilities, English language learners, and the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) communities. These students have historically required higher levels of intervention and services than their same-aged peers.

When the Board focuses on time-honored and proven instruction, strategies, and resources to meet the needs of all students, it can close student achievement gaps and move the highest quality of education into the classroom for all students, not just for those students who have fallen behind.

By staying grounded in the science of reading through appropriate teacher resources, curriculum, and instructional strategies, CCSD’s No. 1 priority for achieving high student performance can be a realized vision.

#### 4. Align District Resources

Some of the most noteworthy academic programs were developed in districts with limited budgets. However, most districts purchase literacy intervention programs and train teachers

to use them. Since average and above-average students benefit so much from a literacy-embedded curriculum, researchers

say districts can significantly impact student literacy by redirecting professional development funds toward helping teachers use literacy-based strategies.

**A district that has a culture of data-informed decision-making is able to sustain a commitment to continuous improvement.<sup>16</sup>**

### The Science of Reading

► **PHONEMIC AWARENESS** refers to a student’s ability to focus on and manipulate the small units that make up spoken language. Phonemic awareness is essential in PreK-2, as it goes hand-in-hand with phonics instruction. Children can learn this skill long before they are ready to read.

Examples of phonemic awareness are:

- Recognizing or creating rhyming words
- Breaking words into syllables
- Listening to songs and poetry
- Stretching words out into each sound, as in (c/a/t)

#### Essential Components of Reading

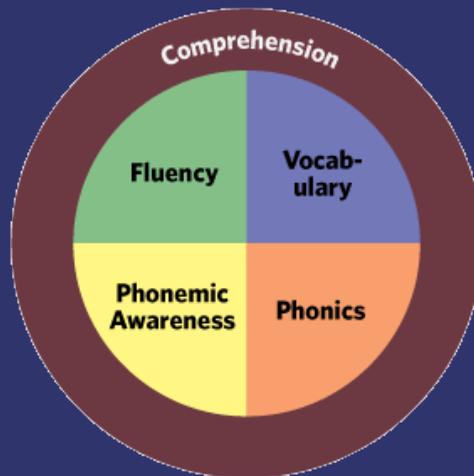


Photo: Read Naturally

16. <https://www.publicconsultinggroup.com/media/1265/literacy-guidelines.pdf>

**“Without district support, it is unlikely ... that all district schools will explicitly set and work towards literacy improvement as an urgent improvement goal.”<sup>17</sup>**

Nevada, along with at least 17 other states and the District of Columbia, plans to use \$1 million from its American Rescue Plan funds to access high-quality professional development. The project, “Science of Literacy Professional Development,” supports evidence-based early literacy work, such as the science of reading. The professional learning experience would take place in a cohort model where educators learn how to apply the work to daily instructional practice.<sup>17</sup>

Researchers advise districts to invest very carefully in programs and materials related to literacy intervention. There is a direct relationship between how far we raise literacy achievement and the cost per student. Students who often need the most expensive intervention are in the bottom third of achievers. From experience, it is my opinion that most intervention programs fail because they are initially under-resourced and then changed before any actual, substantive change(s) can occur.

## **The Science of Reading**

► **PHONICS** is the relationship between letters and sounds in written language. Data show that phonics instruction in early grades proves to be the most effective, evidence-based method to teach students how to “crack the code” of reading, i.e., how to decode (read) and encode (write) words.

Teaching phonics during whole-group and small-group instruction ensures students receive the kind of instruction that will help them to Read by Grade 3, regardless of subgroup, background knowledge, vocabulary strength, or home life.

Phonics instruction includes learning how to decode (read) and encode (write) words. When educators refer to the science of reading, it is typically focused on the scientifically proven strategies and methods for explicit phonics instruction.

► **FLUENCY** is the ability to read the way you speak. It is the ability to make sense of the text without stopping to decode each word, which is easier once students understand the phonics rules. Fluency leads to reading faster with more accuracy and more expression.

17. <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/07/Nevada-ARP-ESSER-State-Plan.pdf>

To ensure that our literacy programs are serving their intended purpose and have the best chances for success, I suggest budgeting adequate time and funding for the programs to gain traction and see results.

It will be imperative to include frequent audits of program benefits by:

- **Requiring annual updates**
- **Defining how the budget supports literacy programs**
- **Examining the cost-per-student by tier in the Districts’ literacy plan**
- **Modeling other districts that have had success and comparing costs**
- **Studying comprehension progress over time for each program**
- **Monitoring how many schools use each program**
- **Creating a teacher and administrator review of each program**

**"Children who have developed strong reading skills perform better in school and have a healthier self-image. They become lifelong learners and sought-after employees." <sup>18</sup>**

## The Science of Reading

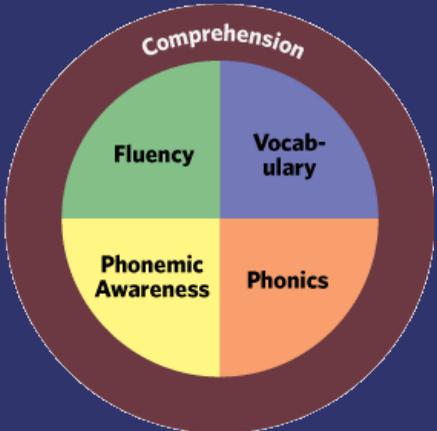
► **VOCABULARY** supports reading development and increases comprehension. First, students have to be able to correctly decode words (for example, reading the word “horse” instead of “house” in a sentence makes a big difference). Then they have to be able to encode, or understand, the words they are reading to make sense of the content.

Instruction should actively engage students, including:

- Learning words before reading assignments
- Repetition of word use
- Multiple exposures
- Learning in rich contexts, including read-alouds and hands-on activities

► **COMPREHENSION** is the ultimate goal of reading. It means students understand the text they read. Vocabulary development and instruction play a critical role in comprehension.

**Essential Components of Reading**



18. <https://www.bizjournals.com/albany/news/2015/01/21/the-importance-of-literacy-in-a-child-s.html>

### **5. Provide Effective PD**

Large school districts must provide professional development (PD), coaching, and mentorship. As in all areas, researchers say quality PD should be a top concern. The best PD for teaching literacy should come from teachers' needs and a sound research base, including continuous support and follow-up.

PD metrics should be evaluated by measuring overall teacher comprehension, teacher reviews of literacy intervention programs, and outcomes yearly.

### **6. Consistently Assess Programs and Performances**

This metric measures accurate data production and the frequency at which the Board, teachers in the classroom, and the adult(s) at home get data and status updates. The District will evaluate all programs to create a "data culture" within the walls of CCSD that encompass, at minimum, a quarterly reporting goal.

### **7. Develop Community Support**

Too often, we think of reading and writing as part of the curriculum and

not a part of life. But with a community as diverse as Clark County's, part of the job of educating our students must be educating their parents as well. Parents from diverse cultural backgrounds must understand the benefits of reading and storytelling to their children and begin communicating with them as early as possible.

As board members, we should find alternatives to increase access to information regarding the importance of literacy in education and life for the communities we serve.

Suggested topics for outreach may include:

- Family reading time can reduce children's screen time
- Reading together can improve focus and concentration
- Reading helps writing skills
- Reading for just six minutes a day can reduce stress
- Improve your memory and slow cognitive decline through reading
- Children with access to books get an equivalent of three extra years of school

**Low literacy skills are the common denominator in school discipline, attendance and dropout problems, juvenile crime, adverse health outcomes, and poor health behaviors.<sup>19 20</sup>**

19. <https://www.readingfoundation.org/third-grade-reading-matters>

20. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK11942/>

## **Closing Thoughts**

As a CCSD board member, I want what most families want for their students—access to high-quality education throughout students’ entire academic careers, beginning with their earliest learning experiences and continuing through graduation.

**We know two things to be absolutes:**

- **When local school board members perform their leadership roles and responsibilities successfully, they positively affect student achievement.**
- **Literacy is the foundation of learning, the key to graduating, and the basic skills required to function in our 21st-century global society.**

The science behind how people learn to read is well-established and spans many processes, from vocabulary acquisition to comprehension to the role of background knowledge. Thoroughly and systematically teaching students foundational reading skills, which allow readers to decipher which sounds represent which letters—i.e. teaching phonics—is the most effective way to learn to read and become a fluent communicator.

Nevada, along with at least 18 other states and the District of Columbia, plans to use American Rescue Plan funds to further the “science of reading” or support other evidence-based early literacy work. Nevada is rolling out \$1 million in funding for professional learning for educators in the science of reading during the 2021-22 school year.<sup>21</sup>

**To truly create the conditions for academic achievement, the Clark County School District Board of Trustees must ensure literacy is a District-wide priority.**

We can significantly impact student literacy by redirecting professional development funds toward helping teachers use literacy-based strategies, such as through the science of reading. And we must allow these programs and practices time to gain traction and take effect.

Following the seven goals of **The Literacy Plan** will help CCSD keep student success as its core business, in line with the Focus: 2024 strategic plan. It also supports the state-guided mission that all students will progress in school and graduate prepared to succeed and contribute to a diverse global society.

I have confidence that our administrators, literacy specialists, educators, and interventionists, will ensure *all students* have access to this powerful method of reading instruction and will provide explicit phonics instruction as the foundation of delivering education to our CCSD students.

21. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/more-states-are-making-the-science-of-reading-a-policy-priority/2021/10>



## **About the Author**

I am a fourth-generation Nevadan, a third-generation Clark County School District graduate, a skilled legal professional, small-business owner, president-elect of the Nevada State PTA, and a passionate public education advocate.

While most school board trustees will never claim to have personally taught an older child to read or write better, I believe it's important for trustees to understand the issues around literacy. I have extensive experience in this subject matter and empathize with teachers tasked with filling literacy gaps. I began tutoring students when I was 15 and continued until I graduated from college.

As an attorney in the financial tech industry, I owe much of my knowledge to a robust STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) education from the CCSD. I was privileged to be placed in a progressive slate of wood shop, technology, and computers at R.O. Gibson Middle School. I then attended the Advanced Technologies Academy and eventually graduated from the Georgia Institute of Technology.

**“I believe my STEAM education was the door that I walked through to get to my success – but literacy was the key that opened that door.”**

Yours in service,

**Kali**  
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