

Alignment for Early Literacy

Review of Delaware's Prekindergarten to Grade 3 Licensure and Certification Landscape

Summary 4 of 4¹: What are our recommendations based on this analysis?

Key Findings

- There is a clear evidence base for teaching literacy, and current state standards are aligned to the evidence base.
- There is a clear evidence base for utilizing job-embedded professional development to advance practice, and the current regulations and professional development standards are aligned to that approach.
- The scan of the regulatory structure did not find any major gaps in the roles or requirements for certification when compared to other states or to the current evidence base. However, there are a number of critical roles at the school level focused on literacy that are not captured by the regulatory or certification structures (such as Reading Assist, reading interventionists, and literacy coaches). This calls for a deeper exploration.

¹ See the full report for detailed analysis as well as the associated summaries (1–4).

- The pathways available for teachers to enter the profession and advance are accessible, clear, and aligned to models in other states and include support and incentives via compensation or discounts for tuition, opportunities for specialization, and professional development credit. Stakeholders reported a need for greater incentives to align to teacher support needs and that these incentives are not widely known by teachers.
- Stakeholders report a high demand on specialists at the school level to support learning needs, with triage processes in place to refer children to special programs or for IEPs. This indicates a need for review of staffing structures at the classroom, school, and district levels.
- Due to the majority of teachers in the talent pool in the veteran but not retirement-eligible group, professional development is a critical lever to aligning current teacher practice to ILA standards.
- While preparation courses appear to match regulatory requirements, a further analysis of course content could indicate areas for improved alignment to the ILA standards.

Methodology

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach with a document and data review, a research literature review, and an abbreviated interview series with key system stakeholders. To understand the gap between this regulatory and comparable model review and the identified priority for literacy improvement, the research team turned to **stakeholders** to share their perspectives and experiences. In interviews with stakeholders representing different layers, the research team for this report learned of promising new programs with the Department of Education and strong existing collaborations between the State Board of Education, the Professional Standards Board, and partner institutes in preparation. Each interview was scheduled for 60 minutes and followed a basic protocol that was tailored to match the unique positions of each stakeholder. While the specific identities of stakeholders are withheld for anonymity, interview participants were linked to the following groups within Delaware:

- Professional Standards Board
- P-20 Council
- Early Childhood Council
- Department of Education: Office of Licensure and Certification, Office of Early Learning, and Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development
- Reading Assist
- Preschool and elementary site administrators

Input gathered in the interviews was used to inform the research team to internal resources (such as program descriptions, etc.) and check emerging findings for validity. All findings were previewed with stakeholders in advance of report finalization.

Data and Regulatory Review

The research team benefited from data reports provided by the Department of Education related to the teacher labor pool and current placement. Queries included certification status, type, and employment status, years in the role, years in the profession, specializations, job titles, and other placement information. The regulatory review consisted of an analysis of publicly posted regulatory language.

Relevant Report Highlights

Delaware is a changing state serving a diverse student body with equally diverse needs and assets. Reaching the state’s vision of “Every learner ready for success in college, career and life” calls for bold actions to improve academic achievement. Released in 2019, Delaware’s Literacy Plan aims to advance state goals for improving literacy for public school students, who on average score at around 52% proficiency for language arts, with scores varying across racial and socioeconomic identifiers and across other identified needs. As stated in the plan and supported by current research, the earliest years of schooling—from pre-kindergarten to Grade 3—are the critical period to building strong readers for life. Additionally, research indicates that the teacher is the most significant factor in a child’s academic achievement with the caveat that even the most talented of individual educators require strong preparation and support systems to reach their full potential in supporting young learners.

Direct student learning between teacher and student is at the center of every school system, and that learning is supported—or not—by nested layers of support starting with the teacher team within a school, school and district leadership, and all the way up to the state system of support for professional development, certification, and licensure. In theory, and at the highest possible potential, each system layer depends on the success of the others, and all rest upon a firm foundation of evidence-based practice.

Within the teacher and teacher-team layers of this system, research indicates that teacher growth and impact on student achievement are built upon a combination of job-embedded professional development, teacher collaboration, and direct incentives for advancement. This evidence base is reflected in the seven ILA standards for teaching preparation, and especially through the focus of standard 6: “Candidates collaboratively participate in ongoing inquiry with colleagues and mentor teachers and participate in professional learning communities.” To impact the literacy achievement of Delaware’s students, teachers must be supported to grow, learn, and connect with each other in an ecosystem of literacy professionals within their school buildings and district communities.

Delaware’s Literacy Plan and the existing initiatives for professional development support for teachers put the state well on the way to advancing its goals for improving literacy for public school students. Key levers for continued progress lie at the school and district levels through high-quality and job-embedded professional development to lift all of Delaware’s teachers to a common approach to teaching literacy. For new teachers entering the profession, an external requirement to demonstrate their grasp of the science of reading could ensure consistent preparation. This path has potential drawbacks of increasing the bar to enter the classroom at a time when teacher shortages are always close at hand. Finally, the preschool setting is uniquely attuned to the developmental needs of our youngest students. That does not mean the preschool educators should be siloed from the K–3 settings or held to different standards for preparation. The content to meet the pre-literacy needs of children ages 3 and 4 must be different than for elementary educators, but the levels of literacy preparation required for the educators should be aligned to the developmental levels of the children served. Through continued collaboration by the State Board of Education, Professional Standards Board, and Department of Education, we believe the structures are in place for preparing and supporting educators as they provide literacy instruction and, if necessary, intervention to Delaware’s youngest students.

Selected Considerations and Recommendations

- Identify and review the impact of current incentives for professional development through compensation and flexible use of time for collaboration for literacy across grade bands. Consider expanding incentives according to insights on impact.
- Improving strategic utilization of specialized literacy roles and teacher teams could, with further research and responsive implementation, improve student literacy performance.
- Consider incentives to schools and districts to examine their use of current literacy professionals and encourage (through grants and principal evaluations) the development of literacy teams
- Complete further research on the utilization of literacy-focused roles across pre-K to the Grade 3 band.
- Examine the overlap between early childhood certification and elementary certification and analyze the literacy approach within preparation for the two different pathways.