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# Kentucky Read to Succeed Evaluation: Year 1 Report Executive Summary

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Kentucky Department of Education  
3000 Sower Blvd., 5th Floor  
Frankfort, KY 40601

**Submitted by:**

ICF Incorporated, L.L.C.  
1902 Reston Metro Plaza  
Reston, VA 20190



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## **Contributing Authors**

Kristen Usher, Samira Syal, Susana Mazuelas Quirce, Samantha Spinney, Anna Talley, Karen Hahn, Spencer Barr — ICF

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Prior to the onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, 50% of Kentucky's third-graders did not score at or above proficiency in reading (Kentucky Department of Education [KDE], 2019) and Kentucky's fourth-graders were declining in their reading results (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Compounding these trends is current research that shows that the impact of COVID-19 has been particularly pronounced among early learners (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2023). However, well-established research has shown that investing in early literacy through teacher professional development and through classroom curriculum with strong literacy content, such as phonemic awareness and systematic phonics instruction, improves student literacy achievement (e.g., Didion et al., 2019; National Reading Panel, 2000; Piasta et al., 2009). One program that incorporates each of these literacy components is the Lexia Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS®) Professional Learning. Evaluations of the impact of participating in LETRS have found significant increases in teachers' knowledge of early literacy skills as well as increases in the quality of literacy instruction, student engagement, and teaching competencies (Folsom et al., 2017). Alongside these educator outcomes, evaluations of LETRS have also found increases in students' grade-level proficiency in Grades K–3 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023) and increases in students' Grade 3 reading proficiency (Mississippi Department of Education, 2023).

In response to these statewide trends and relevant literature, the Kentucky General Assembly passed the Read to Succeed Act (Senate Bill 9, 2022), which supports evidence-based early literacy instruction based on the science of reading and invests in teachers to increase student success in reading. The Kentucky Reading Academies program, implemented through the Read to Succeed Act, intends to transform literacy instruction across the state by expanding access to the LETRS® Professional Learning. Educators and administrators across the state are able to opt in to this no-cost professional learning opportunity and enroll in LETRS for Educators or LETRS for Administrators. Each course is self-paced, with LETRS for Administrators consisting of five units intended to be completed in 1 year and LETRS for Educators including eight units designed to be completed over 2 years. The Kentucky Reading Academies program is being implemented in three phases targeting three cohorts of educators and administrators. Cohort 1 began in fall 2022 and Cohort 2 launched in fall 2023; there are plans to launch Cohort 3 in fall 2024. During the 2024–2025 academic year, a literacy coaching model will be added in select schools across the commonwealth.

The goal of the Kentucky Reading Academies is to influence K–5 educators' knowledge, beliefs, and classroom instructional practices in early literacy so as to ultimately improve student reading and writing outcomes. In particular, the program has five literacy goals for educator and student learning:

- a) Increased teacher knowledge regarding how students learn to read and why some students struggle.
- b) Increased teacher capacity to incorporate instructional strategies aligned to their new learning regarding how students learn to read and why some students struggle into their classroom practice.
- c) Increased adoption of high-quality instructional resources for reading and writing at Tier 1 with aligned resources at Tiers 2–3.

- d) Increased student progress toward grade-level proficiency based on universal screeners and diagnostic assessments.
- e) Increased student outcomes at Grade 3 on the Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA) for reading.

In 2023, the KDE hired ICF, a third-party evaluator, to address four primary research questions that together seek to help the KDE and other stakeholders understand the extent and ways in which participation in the Kentucky Reading Academies is shaping educator practice and student learning.

This evaluation utilized a mixed-methods approach that included quantitative metrics collected through teacher surveys and the KSA along with qualitative data collected through school-based observations and focus groups with instructional staff and school leaders. Quantitative data was analyzed descriptively, including through subgroup analysis, and inferentially, using hierarchical linear modeling. Qualitative data were transcribed and coded using an inductive approach. Findings from across data sources were triangulated based on topic area and evaluation question.

## Key Findings

In examining trends across research questions, participants benefitted from new and increased knowledge, strengthened or modified beliefs about how students learn to read and why they struggle, implementing new or adjusted strategies into their classroom practice, and saw early indicators of positive student outcomes as a result. Each of these trends is discussed further, as aligned to relevant research questions.

### Research Question 1: To what extent and in what ways does participation in the Kentucky Reading Academies influence educator knowledge, beliefs, and classroom instruction?

**Overall participation:** Participation in the Kentucky Reading Academies varied by district and school, with some participants reporting that they were the only participant in their school or grade level. In contrast, some districts or school administrators encouraged or required educators to participate in the academies, which tended to result in larger cohorts of participants in that district or school. Across data sources, educators reported that participation in the Kentucky Reading Academies had a positive influence on their knowledge, beliefs, and classroom instruction or educational practice. Educators described their experience with the Kentucky Reading

#### Evaluation Research Questions

1. To what extent and in what ways does participation in the Kentucky Reading Academies influence educator knowledge, beliefs, and classroom instruction?
2. To what extent are the Kentucky Reading Academies' five literacy goals for educator and student learning met?
3. To what extent does each element of the LETRS program (digital learning platform, print materials, live virtual sessions, bridge-to-practice activities) positively influence educator knowledge, beliefs, and classroom instruction? How?
4. When the literacy coaching model is established, to what extent are the school-based coaches effective in supporting and achieving positive literacy outcomes? (*Addressed in Year 2 of this evaluation.*)

Academies to be “eye-opening” and “informative,” with many veteran teachers reporting that the LETRS professional learning was the best professional development experience of their careers.

**Educator knowledge:** Surveyed teachers in both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 demonstrated increases in literacy skills and knowledge throughout the academic year and although this growth was not statistically significant (perhaps due to the short amount of time between the fall and spring surveys), statistically significant differences in knowledge were seen between Cohort 1 and Cohort 2, suggesting enhanced benefits to educator knowledge over time. Teachers and administrators also reported that Kentucky Reading Academies participation had increased participants’ confidence in their literacy knowledge, which translated into reported greater comfort teaching literacy. For example, one first-grade teacher reported, “Learning about morphology and the origin of words has added so much to my own knowledge of why we pronounce words the way we do—why you know they’re compound, why you know the different pronunciations. In the past, I would be like, ‘Well, I don’t know the rule; that’s just the way it is.’”

**Educator beliefs:** Surveyed educators reported high levels of agreement with belief statements aligned to a phonics approach to literacy and lower agreement ratings about statements related to the whole-word or meaning-based approach. Although a change to beliefs over time was not statistically significant, analysis did find that those in Cohort 1 who had participated in the Kentucky Reading Academies for the longest amount of time were statistically significantly less likely to agree with statements related to a whole-word or comprehension-focused approach than those in Cohort 2. This trend is in alignment with content from LETRS that emphasized a phonics-based approach rather than one focused on comprehension. Similar to findings related to educator knowledge, the lack of statistical significance may be representative of the short time between the two surveys. Teachers and administrators also shared shifting beliefs related to strategies to help students learn to read and the overall benefits of early literacy.

“ I’ve always looked at kids who struggle and struggle and struggle as there’s got to be some kind of learning disability going on with them ... and looking at the science behind how the brain works. ... It’s been enlightening. ... It might be that you’re just not hitting them where you need to hit them as far as what they need—how they need to learn.

– Grade 1 teacher, Cohort 1

**Classroom instruction:** Most teachers were integrating strategies learned in LETRS into their classroom instruction, with teachers in Cohort 1 reporting greater implementation of LETRS strategies than those in Cohort 2. However, both cohorts reported that they needed additional time to reflect on and plan how to fully apply LETRS strategies in their own classrooms. This suggests that teachers may continue to add or adjust teaching strategies even after they have completed their LETRS program. Accordingly, improved literacy outcomes among students may lag a year or two behind teacher participation while teachers scale up implementation of new tools and approaches—as preliminary analysis for this evaluation has found. During this reported initial implementation, educators used the knowledge gained in

“ I’m still trying to balance the workload of getting, you know, everything complete. So maybe down the road, then I can start incorporating those [strategies] more.

– Grade 2 teacher, Cohort 2

LETRS to make decisions about general strategies and structure to use in the classroom as well as to inform the incorporation of various instructional content into their classrooms. Of particular salience were strategies and tools related to phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and morphology.

**Educational practice:** Administrators also leveraged information learned through their participation in the Kentucky Reading Academies to shape conversations with and observations of teachers as well as to inform decision-making. Some administrators also highlighted the use of assessments from LETRS in individual classrooms or grade levels, including a Phonological Awareness Screening Test and a phonics assessment. In addition, participants in LETRS for Administrators described adding more data discussions to weekly or monthly professional learning communities and incorporating discussions about data into coaching sessions to inform teacher instruction and shape student support.

## Research Question 2: To what extent are the Kentucky Reading Academies' five literacy goals for educator and student learning met?

*Goal A: Increased teacher knowledge regarding how students learn to read and why some students struggle.*

As discussed under Research Question 1, educators reported increased knowledge about student literacy, with initial analysis suggesting that this knowledge increases during the 2 years of participating in the Kentucky Reading Academies, although that growth was not yet statistically significant. Specific knowledge gains reported by educators related to how the brain processes written language, phonics and phonemic awareness, and ways to help students struggling with elements of literacy.

*Goal B. Increased teacher capacity to incorporate instructional strategies aligned to their new learning regarding how students learn to read and why some students struggle into their classroom practice.*

Although some teachers felt limited in their ability to quickly and fully implement their LETRS learnings (see discussion under Research Question 1), many teachers and administrators shared that their own capacity to incorporate strategies and skills from LETRS had already increased. Those in Cohort 1 reported that it had gotten easier to identify, select, and implement LETRS strategies compared with those in Cohort 2, again attributing this to the increased time and practice Cohort 1 teachers had with these strategies. In addition to being able to use specific resources in their classroom practice, many teachers reported an increased intentionality in their literacy instruction as a result of their participation in the Kentucky Reading Academies.

“ [At first] it was scary doing it on my own because it's like, 'Am I using this strategy the right way?' ... So, it was terrifying last year to make that change. I kind of switched it midyear, [but] even just in that, like, half a year, I saw so much more growth. ... So, I think now I'm getting some success with these—the strategies that seemed crazy at the time.  
– Kindergarten teacher, Cohort 1

During observations, teachers demonstrated strong pedagogy, receiving high average ratings across all competencies observed. However, teachers displayed opportunities for improvement in

instructional implementation during observations. In particular, additional support may be needed to improve instruction related to spelling in the context of reading, writing, grammar, fluency, and students reading their own writing, which received the five lowest ratings. This further underscores that it may take teachers an additional year or two following LETRS completion to fully implement these skills into their instruction, and, correspondingly, improvement in student outcomes may be delayed.

*Goal C. Increased adoption of high-quality instructional resources for reading and writing at Tier 1 with aligned resources at Tiers 2–3.*

Many districts had already adopted a high-quality instructional resource (HQIR) specific to literacy, with those numbers increasing throughout the year. Some educators—generally classroom teachers—expressed frustration about the HQIR curricula selection process, particularly the limited role of teachers in resource selection or the cost of various curricula. However, implementation of adopted HQIRs was also progressing at a high rate throughout the year. LETRS participants reported that their participation in the professional learning program had motivated them to implement their district-approved HQIR into their classroom practice. Furthermore, analysis of KSA Reading data found that Grade 4 and 5 students enrolled in districts that had adopted and implemented an HQIR for literacy had higher reading scores than students who did not attend such districts, a promising early indicator of the benefits of these resources.

More broadly, teachers and administrators had varying perspectives about the overall quality and utility of literacy curriculums in place at their schools, generally indicating more favorable views about those that were designated as HQIRs for reading and writing. However, LETRS participants disagreed about the extent to which the curriculum played a critical role in teachers' ability to successfully implement LETRS strategies into their classroom instruction. Overall, most participants reported a belief that while some curricula made it easier to apply LETRS tools and approaches to instruction, the strategies taught in LETRS could be successfully incorporated into any curricula.

*Goal D. Increased student progress toward grade-level proficiency based on universal screeners and diagnostic assessments.*

Teachers and administrators reported increased use of universal screeners and diagnostic assessments to measure student growth and identify areas where students needed extra support, both at the classroom and school level. These assessments were then reported to allow teachers and interventionists to provide more tailored instruction to struggling students. This is a promising development as research has shown that using diagnostic assessments to provide customized intervention can improve students' literacy skills (Catts et al., 2001).

Many Kentucky Reading Academies' participants shared positive anecdotal evidence about incremental student progress resulting from their participation in the reading academies and

implementation of LETRS tools and approaches. Some teachers shared general impressions, reporting that their current class had made more progress than a similar class in previous years, while others reported specific results for specific students or their whole class. For example, one third grade teacher in Cohort 1 of LETRS shared, “I had a little boy that started in third grade last year, reading well below grade level and he was also an English language learner student and we, myself, and one of the intervention teachers, ... we were working with him together using [LETRS] strategies, and by the end of the year, [it] took us all year, but he could read the third-grade passages and did very well on the state assessment.” Other teachers described improvements related to a reduced need for intervention, substantial gains in reading and writing skills among elementary school students who arrived behind grade level, and increased scores in specific assessments across the year. Although not yet seen systematically, these early indicators of program success are a positive sign that LETRS is influencing teachers in a way that is impacting student development and success.

“ I’ve been using some of the assessments from LETRS, like the phonics screeners and things like that, and I’ll show [students] ‘Here’s where you started. Here’s where you are now. Look at how far you’ve come.’ And that’s helped them build their confidence a little bit more.

– Grade 1 teacher, Cohort 1

#### *Goal E. Increased student outcomes at Grade 3 on the KSA for reading.*

As expected, statewide data on the KSA lagged behind teachers’ anecdotal reports of student progress and had yet to show significant gains in learning attributed to LETRS participation. In addition, complications with obtaining another student outcome data source—reading assessment data from a third-party vendor—prevented the inclusion of that analysis in this report, limiting what is fully known about student progress. So, with KSA Reading data as the only available measure of student achievement at the time of this report, analysis was restricted to examining outcomes among students in Grades 4 and 5 during the 2022–2023 school year. Among these students, there was no significant difference between students with teachers who participated in the Kentucky Reading Academies and those with teachers who had not participated in the professional learning. This may be reflective of the more limited implementation of LETRS strategies into classroom instruction that was reported by teachers, particularly during their first year of reading academies participation.

### Research Question 3: To what extent does each element of the LETRS program (digital learning platform, print materials, live virtual sessions, bridge-to-practice activities) positively influence educator knowledge, beliefs, and classroom instruction? How?

The LETRS professional learning content uses a blended model that includes a print manual, an online learning platform, and live virtual sessions with a trained facilitator. Overall, survey participants reported that the most-used component was the print materials followed by the live facilitated sessions. Correspondingly, survey respondents indicated that both print materials and the live facilitated sessions had a positive influence on their understanding of literacy skills and strategies, their literacy beliefs, and their classroom practice. This influence seemed to grow over time with those in Cohort 1 indicating statistically higher ratings than those in Cohort 2 across many of these domains. However, although participants were generally pleased with the facilitators



of the live virtual sessions, many expressed that the length of the sessions was excessive and acted as a barrier to robust participation.

Many educators also provided positive opinions about the overall online learning platform, particularly the diverse modes of communicating information. However, several of the components within the platform were less utilized. For example, educators varied in their use of the embedded bridge-to-practice activities, with some required to complete these activities to qualify for participation incentives offered by their district while others struggled to complete these activities based on their role in the classroom. Educators also had divergent thoughts on the benefits of embedded videos, with some reporting that the videos of teachers enacting LETRS strategies were extremely valuable and others indicating that they found the videos unrealistic and less useful. In contrast, participants were generally unified in their reports that the online journal and online help center were less useful and correspondingly less used.

“ I think one thing that I've really enjoyed is the energy of the in-person [sessions]. And the presenters have been really good.

– Intervention teacher

## Program Barriers, Facilitators, and Recommendations

Program participants shared several factors that acted as barriers or facilitators to initial participation in the Kentucky Reading Academies, predominately:

- Administrator or district support strengthened the number of participants and the quality of participation.
- Participation in LETRS required a substantial time commitment, which prevented some from participating or fully benefiting from the program.

Many who were able to successfully join the Kentucky Reading Academies described factors that supported their ability to successfully implement LETRS strategies and approaches, including:

- District-level support for the Kentucky Reading Academies created a positive environment for implementation.
- Participating in LETRS with colleagues in the same school supported implementation and helped facilitate long-term planning.

However, participating educators also encountered some barriers to fully implementing LETRS approaches into the instruction or practice, such as:

- The sequencing of LETRS units limited implementation opportunities for some participants who reported that content learned in the middle or end of the year would be best implemented at the beginning of the academic year.
- The length of the live virtual sessions as well as a lack of interaction from participants acted as a disincentive for active engagement.
- Participating in LETRS without other colleagues or without leadership support created additional barriers to implementation, including barriers resulting from curriculum that did not align with LETRS approaches.

Aligned with reported barriers and facilitators, participants offered several recommendations on how to improve and extend the Kentucky Reading Academies moving forward:

- Participants suggested a variety of approaches to address or compensate for the significant time commitment required to participate in the Kentucky Reading Academies including stipends, time off, or offering the program during the summer.
- Several participants recommended ways that reading academies participants could further their new knowledge or share it with colleagues including through monthly cohort meetings or professional learning communities.

## Discussion and Next Steps

Although every participant’s experience was unique—shaped by their own literacy knowledge; prior experience teaching; and the individual context of their districts, schools, and personal lives—numerous common themes emerged across our data, lending confidence to these findings. In examining these trends across research questions, participants benefitted from new and increased knowledge, strengthened or modified beliefs about how students learn to read and why they struggle, implemented new or adjusted strategies into their classroom practice, and saw early indicators of positive student outcomes as a result. Findings related to change over time for educator knowledge and beliefs and student outcomes were not yet statistically significant, perhaps reflective of the relatively short time between the fall and spring surveys (3 months), or the more limited implementation of LETRS strategies into classroom instruction that was reported by teachers, particularly during their first year of Kentucky Reading Academies participation.

“ No one else in my building is doing [LETRS] ... it's hard to piggyback off of what the teachers are doing in the classroom because they're not exactly teaching it the same way I am; or just completely different.  
 – Reading interventionist

Nevertheless, these preliminary findings are important because research has shown that content knowledge in phonological awareness, phonics, and morphology—all topics that Kentucky Reading Academies participants reported learning through LETRS—are essential for teachers to have in building a foundation of students’ literacy development (Moats & Foorman, 2003; Moats, 2014; National Center on Improving Literacy, 2022; Seidenberg et al., 2020).

Furthermore, research has found that teachers who have more knowledge about early literacy concepts and strategies produce students with higher reading gains (Piasta et al., 2009) and that the use of diagnostic assessment to provide tailored classroom instruction and intervention can improve students’ literacy skills (Catts et al., 2001).

As this evaluation enters a second year of data collection and analysis, ICF will continue to partner with the KDE to interpret the findings and implications of this report to make data-informed decisions about program implementation and evaluative focus.

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