



How NCIL Helped a School District Navigate the Adoption of a Science of Reading-Aligned Curriculum

When new state legislation mandated that a large Mid-Atlantic school district adopt a Science of Reading-aligned curriculum and a new literacy screening assessment, district leaders faced a daunting transformation.

Years of reliance on a familiar but outdated curriculum had created deep institutional habits. The prospect of wholesale change sparked widespread anxiety among staff, while teachers struggled to understand what “Science of Reading-aligned” actually meant for their daily practice. Compounding the challenge, district leaders had limited experience observing literacy instruction in classrooms—leaving them ill-equipped to guide the transition.

What initially appeared to be a straightforward compliance requirement quickly revealed itself as something far more complex: a fundamental cultural and instructional transformation that demanded both organizational restructuring and individual readiness for change.

HOW NCIL FILLED THE NEED

Clarified the Landscape: In 2022, NCIL provided five bi-monthly 2-hour sessions for district leaders, principals, literacy coaches, and teachers. These sessions focused on understanding the Science of Reading, readiness for change, adopting a new aligned curriculum, and using literacy screeners. NCIL also helped leaders identify programs on the state-approved list, guided them through publisher communications for formal curriculum review, and supported engagement with families and school board members. This groundwork gave leaders clarity and confidence in selecting a new curriculum.

Strengthened Alignment and Capacity: In 2023, NCIL delivered nine 60–90-minute sessions for district leaders and literacy coaches. Topics included intensifying comprehension instruction, planning professional learning, reviewing curriculum materials, and analyzing student screening data.

NCIL also advised on how to communicate progress with school board members and involve families in the adoption process. This year of focused support strengthened the district's capacity to evaluate curriculum and plan professional learning.

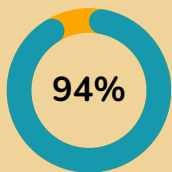
Developed Instructional Leadership: In 2024, NCIL led five 2-hour sessions for leaders and coaches on conducting and calibrating classroom walk-throughs and debriefing with teachers. This was the district's first experience with systematic literacy walk-throughs. Together, NCIL and the district developed a comprehensive checklist and a quick drop-in version for observations. Leaders practiced using these tools by coding classroom videos across multiple sessions with calibration support, which strengthened their ability to recognize explicit, evidence-based reading instruction. Leaders then conducted hundreds of classroom walk-throughs using the new checklists, primarily in K-2 classrooms, and focused on phonemic awareness and phonics.

Sustained Momentum: In 2025, NCIL provided five 1-hour sessions for district leaders focused on assessment, small-group instruction, analyzing walk-through data, and planning for the future. During this year, the district implemented the new curriculum in K-2 classrooms with a focus on phonemic awareness and phonics. NCIL worked with leaders to review observation data, provide feedback to principals, and strategically fade direct support while setting achievement goals for 2025-2026.

Across the partnership (2022–2025), the district also served as a pilot site for validating a new literacy screener in collaboration with a state university. NCIL provided ongoing support, including weekly office hours to address the district’s participation in the research study, discuss technical aspects of assessment validity, and help leaders frame questions for the university partner.

RESULTS

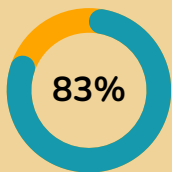
The district strengthened its capacity to deliver evidence-based literacy instruction in K–5 classrooms, establishing a foundation for sustained improvement in reading outcomes.



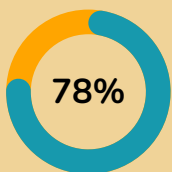
Nearly all teachers (94%) used the new Science of Reading-aligned curriculum



Most (over 90%) provided multiple practice opportunities and conducted checks for understanding.



A large majority (80–85%) connected phonemes to graphemes, followed a clear scope and sequence, and used scaffolding effectively.



Many (78%) applied explicit instructional routines and focused lessons on the phonics pattern of the day.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Cultivate Relationships** – Being vulnerable, acknowledging mistakes and unknowns, and remaining nonjudgmental helped build trust.
2. **Respect the Ups and Downs of Change** – Teachers often grieved familiar practices before acceptance; adoption was both a cognitive and emotional process.
3. **Recognize It Is a Long-Term Process** – Implementation was iterative, not immediate; misconceptions about the new curriculum and screening assessment needed to be dispelled early.
4. **Start Strong** – To establish confidence early, identify a clear and achievable first milestone for implementation, such as having teachers unpack and review the new curriculum materials together. Begin with those most eager to engage rather than early resisters for positive group energy.

THE BROADER IMPACT

As districts across the country respond to new state requirements for Science of Reading-aligned curricula and literacy screening assessments, lasting improvement is strongest when support extends beyond one-time training. Meaningful progress requires time, trust, and steady guidance to address both the human and organizational sides of change.

NCIL's multi-year partnership with this district shows how sustained, embedded coaching — paired with practical tools like walk-through checklists and targeted professional learning — can help districts move beyond compliance to true instructional transformation. By staying engaged over time and building internal leadership capacity, NCIL helped this district create the conditions for enduring gains in reading outcomes.