

# Higher Education Literacy Partnership

March 14, 2023

Minnesota Governor Tim Walz  
Education Committee Members of the Minnesota House of Representatives  
Education Committee Members of the Minnesota Senate  
Commissioner Willie Jett, Minnesota Department of Education

Dear Governor Walz, Legislative Education Leaders, and  
Commissioner Jett,

We are pleased that the challenges of delivering universal evidence-based literacy instruction to our students are being discussed at the legislative level. These challenges are complex and will require humility and leadership at every level of our education system to solve.

Multiple levers determine the approaches our state's education system uses when teaching the essential skill of reading to our state's children. These levers include teacher preparation programs, local school district decisions regarding curriculum and ongoing teacher professional development, and state statutes that set the standards for teacher preparation programs and teacher licensing, training, reporting and student outcome expectations.

Reading is a civil right for all learners. Therefore, each lever needs to prioritize equity. The BOLD Literacy plan supports equitable literacy instruction for all students.

The most foundational lever in this system falls to the 29 teacher preparation programs in our state that are charged with preparing our future teachers. These programs are responsible for delivering a robust program that determines how a future teacher understands how reading is acquired, explains and contextualizes the challenges some children will face on the pathway to proficient reading, and most critically, provides instruction on the methods of teaching reading that will bring all children to reading proficiency.

There are a multitude of perspectives for how to accomplish these goals within higher education. You have undoubtedly heard from a minority who are skeptical of the movement toward evidenced-based structured literacy practices. However, the depth and breadth of evidence over decades that points to the universal need to approach reading instruction in a structured and explicit manner on the five foundational reading skills is irrefutable.

With that background, in 2012, we co-founded the Higher Education Literacy Partnership (HELP) with the idea that more dialogue within the higher education literacy community was needed to move more teacher preparation programs into alignment with what the evidence indicates our future teachers should know about how to effectively teach reading. The work of our completely volunteer organization has been sustained and maintained by the enthusiasm and generosity of the many important organizational literacy voices in our state. You can view the list on page one of this letter or on the HELP website [www.helpliteracymn.org](http://www.helpliteracymn.org).

## HELP Organization Partners

- Minnesota Academy of Reading / Minnesota Reading Association
- Minnesota Center for Reading Research at the College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota
- Minnesota Department of Education
- ServeMinnesota
- International Dyslexia Association – Upper Midwest Branch
- Decoding Dyslexia Minnesota
- June Stern Family Foundation for Children with Dyslexia
- Professors in Minnesota Teacher Preparation Programs

Forming this diverse group was intentional. We believe that the conversations that the HELP community has had internally and in public over the past ten years have helped to drive the movement that you are seeing toward evidence-based structured literacy practices in schools and teacher preparation programs today. We have hosted webinars with local and national literacy researchers that have been attended by thousands of educators across our state. HELP members have been leaders of this movement within their own universities as well as professional organizations such as the Minnesota Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (MACTE).

We applaud the legislative and executive branch for doing its part. Three years ago, changes to state statute required that higher education institutions align their pre-service teacher preparation programs to evidence-based structured literacy practices. This change set off a positive trajectory of discussion among teacher preparation programs about how to better teach future teachers about literacy and the importance of structured instruction. In addition, the state commitment to fund a grant program for in-service teacher professional development in evidence-based literacy instruction was another great step. But more needs to be done, because we continue to see that non-evidence-based practices are, unfortunately, the norm in our state's schools. And our statewide literacy achievement scores reflect that fact.

**We ask you to support the work that the Minnesota Department of Education is doing in its BOLD Literacy plan.** We look forward to continuing to move the dial toward evidence-based structured literacy in all classrooms that will lead to better outcomes for our students. We can all agree that reading is one of the most fundamental and crucial skills we must teach our children before they leave school. The BOLD Literacy plan is a strong step toward creating a more just and equitable educational system.

We are a community full of researchers and reading professionals. As in all communities it is challenging to move away from practices you have built your career teaching and studying. However, the tide has shifted permanently toward recognizing the indisputable body of evidence that proves that nearly all students can learn to read with evidence-based structured literacy methods, provided it is offered with fidelity, and with enough repetition and opportunity for student practice.

Please let us know if we can be of any assistance as legislation progresses.

Onward for the kids,  
Susan Thomson  
Co-Founder, Higher Education Literacy Partnership  
Senior Strategic Analyst Research and Development, ServeMinnesota

Christine Stern  
Co-Founder, Higher Education Literacy Partnership  
Founder/Trustee, June Stern Family Foundation for Children with Dyslexia

HELP Members  
Erin Gillett, PhD, MN State University Moorhead  
Joan Sax-Bendix, EdD, Winona State University  
Eva Boehm, MA, University of Minnesota  
Debra Peterson, PhD, University of Minnesota (retired)  
Carrie Pfeifer, EdD, Bethany Lutheran College  
Abbey Payeur, PhD, Bethel University  
Lisa Silmsler, EdD, Bethel University

Lisa Krall, PhD, Bemidji State University  
Mary Dosch, PhD, Minnesota State University Moorhead  
Wendy Stuttgen, EdS, CAREI, University of Minnesota  
Jeanne Danneker, PhD, Winona State University (Emerita)  
Rachel Berger, Decoding Dyslexia Minnesota  
Sarah Carlson-Wallrath, JD, International Dyslexia Association – Upper Midwest Branch  
Wendy Lundsgaard, Decoding Dyslexia Minnesota  
David Parker, PhD, Serve Minnesota  
Leo Stern, JD, HELP

Cc: Chairperson Angela Osuji, PhD, PELSB