

# Literacy Preliminary Findings

Dec 20, 2022

## Executive Summary

After research and stakeholder interviews, Science for Georgia recommends two ideas to begin to address the low-literacy crisis. 1) Creation of a central body charged with systematically compiling, and aggressively sharing, literacy progress in Georgia, and 2) establishing early-childhood to post-secondary teacher training and certification that focuses on evidence-based instruction practices.

## Background and Methodology

Science for Georgia interviewed several stakeholders and asked them about the details of their successful community partnerships. In particular, questions centered around:

- What started the initiative?
- What were their specific actions and what resources did they need?
- What challenges did they encounter?
- How do they sustain their success?
- How can others replicate their success and what suggestions they have?

## Key Findings

There are commonalities behind successful community literacy work. It all starts with a dedicated core group who looks for a “spark.” This core group needs to make an effort to know their community well and to come up with one focus-area that meets the specific need of their community and grows awareness (e.g., Bulloch’s Book Bus that distributes books, Dalton’s family outreach program, Marietta’s Literacy for All Collaborative, etc). Interviewees revealed similar needs: to start with “focus groups” to identify the best “spark”, a dedicated community coordinator, schoolboard buy-in, and involvement in a larger conversation to exchange ideas.

Currently, teacher training at all educational levels is too broad and not focused on evidence-based best-practices. To empower teachers to be the experts in their individual classrooms, they need more than a training program or recertification classes. They need support from facilitators or coaches, and toolbox of instructional aids and formative assessments to tailor instruction to their students.

## Preliminary Recommendations

1. There needs to be a coordinating body that:
  - a. Defines age-appropriate literacy instruction evidence-based best-practices
  - b. Tracks each county’s literacy progress as measured by the 4 metrics:
    - i. Kindergarten readiness (the GaDOE uses [GKIDS Readiness Check](#))
    - ii. Reading proficiency entering the 4th grade (as measured by NAEP)
    - iii. 8<sup>th</sup> grade math proficiency (as measured by NAEP)
    - iv. Post-secondary completion (degree programs completed within 6 years, and certificate programs completed within 2 years. Measured by USG and TCSG)
  - c. Compiles experiences from counties with literacy success into a best practices guide. Importantly, this information must be made public and well-disseminated.
  - d. Supports communities in identifying sustainable public-private partnership support for community literacy coordinators.
2. Teacher training and certification needs to focus on evidence-based best-practices, measure teachers’ training outcomes, and provide follow up support for teachers in the classroom.

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## Recommended Committee Next Steps

1. From ongoing pilot programs
  - a. Gather data measuring student and community literacy showing before and after metric
  - b. Compile best practices and lessons learned
2. Understand and outline the role of a coordinating body
  - a. Where would it sit?
  - b. What would it do?
  - c. What powers would it have?
  - d. What would its mandate be?
  - e. What are metrics of success?
  - f. What are milestones it must report on?
3. What legislation is needed?
4. Gather budgetary information to prevent unfunded mandate
5. Understand and research metrics needed to track state-wide progress vs. those needed for teachers to inform classroom instruction.

## Detailed record of feedback received

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**NOTE – overall recommendations are from Sci4Ga. Sources providing feedback are neither supporting nor opposing the overall recommendations.**

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Questions Asked of the Committee in October 2022:

1. What resources and tools does the State of Georgia already have:
  - a. To grow, aid, and build community partnerships (CLCPs, Collective Impact Framework, L4GA, Get GA Reading, etc)
  - b. To track metrics and to measure progress (DECAL, Get GA Reading, DOE, TCSG)
2. What does a successful community partnership look like? How do we replicate that?
3. What started the ball rolling in those communities? If <Example County> was going to start a community literacy partnership – what would they need to do? How would they get started?
  - a. Sci4Ga is talking to Bulloch, Marietta City, and the Community Foundation of North GA. Who else should we talk to?
  - b. How do we get local businesses, healthcare providers (not the usual suspects) involved in these community programs (which lends to stickiness)?

Summary of Answers Received:

## **Resources and tools for development:**

Child development, parent/family support, and business partnerships are areas that lay a foundation for literacy work and support. Examples include:

- Department of Public Health – [Children 1st](#) and [Babies Can't Wait](#) programs are the first early intervention opportunities (Birth – 5).
- Family Resource Center (by County) – Parenting Programs (Parents as Teachers (in home help), Parenting with a Purpose classes, etc.)
- [Georgia Family Support Network](#)
- [Find Help Georgia](#) (Database)
- Public Library System
- Career Academy Network (for education-business partnerships)
- [Parent Family Engagement](#) (Title I, part A funding – DOE)
- [FERST Foundation](#)
- [International Association of Dyslexia – Georgia](#)
- [United Ways throughout GA](#)
- [Family connection Partnerships](#) in all 159 counties
- [Ga Literacy Coordinating Council](#)
- [RESA](#) (16)
- [GPEE](#)
- Atlanta Speech School (the [Rollins Center for Language and Literacy](#) and the [Cox Campus on-line learning platform](#))
- [Top 10 Tools](#)
- [Literacy How](#)

Things to consider:

ESOL community - perhaps [WIDA](#) could be an indicator to consider. Some counties/cities use [Dibels](#) and [MAP](#), but those are not state-wide assessments.

## **Resources and tools for tracking:**

- [GKids](#) – Readiness Check (GA DOE)
- [Lexile](#) Framework and Levels

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- [International Association of Dyslexia – Georgia](#)
- [Deal Center](#)
- [Ga Literacy Coordinating Council](#)
- [DECAL](#)
- [USG](#)
- [TCSG](#)
- [Get GA Reading](#)
- [Neighborhood Nexis](#)
- [GA AWARDS \(GOSA\)](#)
- [GPEE](#)

## **How to form Successful Community Partnerships?**

Takeaways from successful community collaboratives:

Step 1: **Know your community.** What partnerships does the community already have? What is the major issue the community is facing and is aware of? Build on existing work.

Step 2: **Choose one focus area.** For example, Bulloch County wants to get books out to children. Dalton-Whitfield is about empowering parents and supporting beyond classroom home instruction.

Step 3: **A common framework.** Stakeholders need to be on the same page about what outcomes that a community wants to achieve. An example of a framework can be Get GA Reading's four pillars.

Step 4: **Money and resources.** Need grants and funding to get the work going and build: support structures, coordinators and/or coaches, teacher training, new curriculums. Once built, the School System and/or community partners should be able to sustain.

Step 5: **A coordinator or a coordinating body.** Someone needs to coordinate the work among all stakeholders – regular meetings on progress, planning and reporting, etc.

Step 6: **Support from School Board.** School system has to formalize a strategic plan for the school board to approve.

Step 7: Roll Up Sleeves and do a lot of work:

- Building community awareness
- Go to as many meetings and events as possible
- Ask businesses and organizations to invest in literacy efforts
- Check progress – how do teachers feel about the training? Any adjustments to make?
- Grant applications
- Incentivizing stakeholders and players

## Individual Interviews and Feedback

Interviews were conducted with several successful community programs around the state. Below is a summary of their input. Of note, most programs are just getting started. All remarked they had anecdotal evidence of success but should have concrete numbers by the end of May.

From Bulloch County:

### **One Clear Focus: All About Books**

Easy access to books is No.1 priority in Bulloch County.

- Launched in May 2019, the Bulloch County Schools **Book Bus** makes stops throughout the county to provide free books to children. It has facilitated the distribution of more than

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13,326 books to children. It has become a symbol of reading and community commitment. There is an app that enables people to donate books or volunteer at distributions. The bus goes to fairs, food banks, games, etc.

- The Bulloch County Literacy Council encourages **Reading Nooks** in businesses to boost access to books for children and help improve preschool and early-elementary literacy in Bulloch County. They are trying to provide grants to smaller businesses who cannot afford a book nook on their own.

## A Community Coordinator

Crystal Simpkins: Bulloch County Board of Education

- Raises collective awareness
- Builds network support
- Liaisons between stakeholders
- Holds or participates in community events
- Supports and enforces the work of the Bulloch Literacy Council

## Business Buy-in

Community coordinator needs to constantly talk about literacy issues in the community. She goes to events and business meetings to engage with the community and asks for support.

- Businesses think everything is OK because high school graduation rate is high – but they don't know only 30% of kids are fully literate.
- Georgia Power funding
- Local business sponsorships and donations

## School System's Strategic Plan

Had literacy added to strategic plan, so funding could be dedicated for a literacy coordinator.

From Dalton-Whitfield County:

After instituting changes, and before the pandemic, 3rd-grade reading proficiency in Dalton and Whitfield had increased 10%, and 12%, respectively. They are currently recovering from the pandemic and school performance is going up again. Their initiative focuses on a **two-generation approach**. Dalton-Whitfield experiences generational poverty and has many immigrants and dual-language families. Therefore, their priority is to **empower parents** to better support their children. They conduct focus groups and use science and data to inform and instruct parents on talking to their children. They work with schools and learning centers to provide classes for parents. During the summer they host events to educate parents and give out books. Their collaboration with multiple partners started when Get GA Reading reached out to them. **The Get GA Reading's four pillars provide a neutral framework** for the stakeholders to be on a common ground and use a common language.

They have a dedicated coordinator funded by private parties.

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From Marietta City Schools:

**“Literacy and Justice for All” (LJFA) collaboration.** Marietta was working with the Atlanta Speech School and the Whitehead Foundation on the science of reading. Their partnership transformed into a larger collaboration – LJFA, a partnership between the Rollins Center for Language & Literacy at the Atlanta Speech School, Marietta City Schools, the United Way, Learn4Life, Cobb Collaborative, Quality Care for Children and Kennesaw State University.

## Funding

Whitehead foundation funding the United Way which funds Marietta schools for training and tools

- District investments by district – MCS officers, Principals, (but no additional staff)
- Using some ARA funding for auxiliary programs
  - o ESL students – benchmark phonics
  - o Staff supply teachers (para pros) – allows for smaller group instruction
  - o Vision to Learn – national nonprofit that helps kids get glasses (850 kids in district needed glasses but were unaware of need and/or how to get glasses)
- Seeking grants with CHOA – around wellness and resiliency

## Early Learning Component

- Work with as many programs as they can.
- Program led by the City of Marietta
- A coordinator – who works with outside programs – is supportive of people and meets caregivers where they are at
- Rollins Center is working with daycare centers with a fellowship program
  - o Certain number of programs on the Cox Campus
  - o Give a stipend for it
- Also have “mommy and me” programs in the libraries and community centers

## K-3

Full commitment to “evidence-based literacy” for K-3 instruction. It is a large amount of time and resources.

- Reteach teachers literacy instruction methods (via Cox Campus materials)
- Operate under the assumption that they were trained wrong in the first place
- Working “top 10 tools” and “literacy how” and facilitators from Rollins School.
- Change assessments, report cards, books – made sure \*everything\* is aligned to science of reading
- One principal estimated that she spends 50% of her time on science of reading

## How do you make this sustainable?

- Whitehead is funding startup costs They retrained all the current teachers – but moving forward – training will be through the COX Campus free curriculum to onboard new teachers
- Literacy Coaches / Facilitators will be part of the school board budget
  - o District is investing – committed to this work

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- aligning the budget to sustain the work

## Lessons learned

- Retraining all teachers is a large commitment
- They cannot just ignore everything else – must also teach math and science and social studies
- Professional learning days – grant funds paying the teachers during the summer to come in for training and for substitute teachers for learning days during the school year
- Balance time to train and time to teach kids
- There are a lot of partners involved, there must be a coordinator. Learn 4 Life is the acting coordinator for:
  - Kennesaw State, DECAL, Bright From the Start, UGA and GAsate (evaluation of progress), YMCA learning spaces, Talk with my Baby
- Grant did not allow for a planning year – which would have been nice to have

## From Bartow County:

Bartow county has a thriving **Literacy Council (Bartow Literacy Collaborative)** in place. It started by becoming a **Get GA Reading Community**. They have an active **Book Mobile program**. The council had a wide variety of members: educators, industry, health department, and faith-based organizations. This was a great place to make connections and network. From the Literacy Council, the superintendent made connections so that the school system was able to partner with the Health Department to distribute age-appropriate books to children when they were brought in for well visits. They also started several Little Free Library locations around the county.

They would like to expand those little libraries into some of the big businesses around the county coupled with developmental information about language and literacy. An example would be QR codes that take the caregiver to a site that has age specific tips and information.

They are brainstorming a possible program: When a child is born, they would like to enroll parents in a program \to have developmental information sent directly to the home every 6 months. For example: Something the size of the political candidate mailers that are just front and back with activities to do with a child for language and literacy development as well as a list of skills a child should master by that age. They are seeing a decline in fine motor skills (which affects handwriting) as homes are more digital, and children lack the opportunity to develop fine motor skills.

## How to Increase Community Involvement

- **More mentors/volunteers in the schools** – an incentive for individuals and for businesses to give employees time to mentor at a local school. (1 hour a week)
- **Improve background check processes/procedures** (need an easier process for this)– The process to become a mentor can be a barrier. Right now, all mentors are required to have a background check through the Sheriff's Office (SO). Currently, they complete a form and then it is scanned and emailed to the SO. There is a person there that notifies the school when it is complete. A portal for this would be helpful to streamline the process and to share background checks across entities. **Create a framework for a community engagement**

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**council** for literacy. They have a literacy council in Gordon but it is very different from the one in Bartow so a list of best practices would be good to apply lessons learned. Suggestions for who should make up the committee and a set of appropriate activities (right now people often default to what is comfortable, not what is effective or innovative).

- **County government incentive**, something like career academy or charter system incentive.
- When talking about successful community partnerships, we must remember that our families make up our community. Therefore, we need to provide a solid foundation for communication and to access resources needed. Bartow has some very remote, rural, areas that do not have internet access. They are cut off from the print and digital resources that others can easily access.
- When considering creating the sense of urgency regarding the literacy divide and increasing communication, we also need to consider what media channels the current and next generation of parents use as their primary source of information. Websites and Facebook posts are no longer the “go to” for young parents.

From a Local Business: Creature Comforts Brewing:

This local business is piloting a literacy program that focuses on improving 3<sup>rd</sup> grade literacy in Athens-Clarke County. They use volunteers and community coordinators as a liaison between families and schools. Their program has shown some initial successes.

Their thoughts on getting local businesses involved:

- Make a playbook with steps to get started and get involved.
- Collect a list of best practices and pilot programs. Show businesses the value of what is working Help organizations that want to help share their budget at the start to set expectations of how to get going and where it will make a difference (Business A may have \$X to invest – so realistically they can do Y intervention).
- Help organizations figure out metrics and reporting and project management – businesses like to see that their investments are being utilized.

From Monroe County 1st grade teacher Ashley Evans:

Many teachers have not heard of “the science of reading” and they are not trained to teach students in those methods. To make sure that schools use a “science of reading” curriculum, there needs to be a mandate or incentives from the state.

We need to identify the problems early and take action to prevent them, it is too late when kids are in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and not literate – assessments are needed in K-3 to help teachers understand their students’ progress and understand what skills the kids need to be working on.

From Cartersville City Schools:

A successful partnership begins with the community partners who talk to the schools and see what they need. The community will then devise a plan and bring it back to the school. No progress is made when ideas are just given to the schools with no communication as to what is needed for the students.



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From Gwinnett County:

Gwinnett County has recently made great gains with the Board of Education on scientifically proven effective methods of teaching reading.

stakeholders got involved via:

- Incentives for them to join forces
- Sharing Videos (of all stakeholders) about the impact of low- literacy on the day-to-day living for adults who slipped through the cracks and graduated anyway.

From Joy Hawkins:

“Every community has leaders, and everyone knows who they are. Sometimes that leader is a retired teacher, a Rotarian, Family Connection Partnership director, etc. Most communities are interested in their local economy and wealth. I would begin by “setting a community table” of all parties with any possible interest including political leaders, public safety, healthcare workers, educators, etc., and show them facts about their community including literacy scores at 3rd, 5th and 8th grade. Then show them the possible root causes for low literacy (low birth weight babies, the birth mother’s lack of a high school education, etc). After the Literacy Commission completed recommendations in 2018, we tested this method in five locations in GA and several of these areas continue today tracking metrics and all working together to improve literacy in their community (Augusta is one of those areas).”

From Malcolm Mitchell:

“First, we as a state should set a goal for literacy and hold ourselves accountable to that goal – By 2030, xx% of our 3rd grade students will be reading on grade level by the end of 3rd grade.

“Second, we need to understand what we are doing, what we are doing well, and how much money is being spent on pre-k, k-12 and adult literacy. While getting information from our state agencies is needed, it would be beneficial to hear from our local educators who are implementing state policy and using state funds.

“Lastly, one of the goals of this study committee could be to create a State Literacy Commission – 100% supported by the Governor and General Assembly – that will continue this work and get us to the stated goal of students reading on grade level by 2030.”

From RESA representative Jan Black:

- Our state needs an established goal for literacy. The goal needs to be made public by as many means possible.
- Establish Minimum Criteria: The work of this committee should be to coordinate that work by defining the criteria for literacy at each stage of development and setting goals that ensure ALL Georgians have access to literacy from birth to adulthood.
- Identify and Coordinate Initiatives: There are numerous projects in Georgia working to support literacy. We don’t need to change what each group is doing. What if all these agencies, foundations, and projects had a common, achievable goal each year to work toward?

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From UGA Literacy Student, Jennifer Ervin

Jennifer Ervin, a doctoral student at UGA, compiled the attached statement about classroom assessments. This statement is based on her research, interviews, and personal experience as a teacher.

## *Summary:*

A recent “teacher of the year” had been recognized for her work in literacy gains for her 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. Alas, because all of her students entered 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade below-level, and despite their amazing progress, they all still performed below-level on milestones and the teacher was denied year-end performance bonus pay.

This story perfectly illustrates the push and pull between Georgia’s need to test *en masse* student performance vs. the tools that teachers need to improve the literacy of their individual students. States need to measure the overall workforce readiness. Teachers need to be treated as the classroom experts and given the tools to measure fine-grain progress and adapt to their individual student’s needs.

NAEP and GA Milestones are useful indicators of future workforce readiness and can show which school systems may need additional support. But, since results are not adaptive, only measure one outcome, and are delivered in the summer, they are useless for teachers.

In the classroom, teachers need **formative assessments** to show individual real-time growth and enable teachers to adapt. These assessments must look at all components of literacy, because kids progress along different skill sets at different rates. For example, a kid might be doing well in fluency and not in phonemic awareness, and then 3 months later their performance might be different. These adaptive assessments work for all kids, at all literacy stages, even bi-lingual students.

The clear message throughout these responses was that any metric alone will be unreliable, but that multiple measures considered together can provide educators with a more holistic understanding of student growth, reading level, and literacy skills.

Teachers need to be treated as the expert in their classroom who can build the best learning experience for their students. They need support, not micromanagement, from school administrators, literacy coaches, school boards, the DOE, and the community. They asked for a “buffet” of various tools, instructional aids, and assessments that they are then empowered to use to meet the needs of their students.

Teachers should be judged on the progress of their individual students. They would like to work with legislators in a transparent manner to build this paradigm shift together.

## *Assessment Considerations*

It is challenging to talk about a complex content area of literacy in concrete terms, and while I will do my best for the purposes and audience of this summary, I must start with a brief story to help us put

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things into context. I interviewed a literacy teacher this summer who had earned “teacher of the year” at her school. She had been featured in the state department of education’s newsletter for her work and was very proud of the literacy gains her 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students had made. But, when I asked her about testing, she explained to me that according to her students’ test scores, she was performing very poorly as a literacy teacher. In fact, she was one of the only teachers at her school not to receive bonus pay from her state’s Department of Ed. As we discussed how these two things could happen in one year—being named teacher of the year and also being denied this teacher quality bonus pay—she reminded me of all of the factors that complicate test scores as a way to measure literacy growth. Among other factors, she explained that the growth her students were making often did not show up in their state test scores, partly because they were still reading below grade level despite making significant gains in her class, but also because those gains were often in areas that are not assessed on the state exam, including writing, vocabulary, and discussion. She explained that she earned “teacher of the year” because of the literacy gains students make in her classroom, but that these gains do not translate easily to the state-mandated exam. This vignette gives us a brief glimpse into the complex nature of assessing literacy.

With that story in mind, I will summarize here responses from several Georgia teachers and researchers related to metrics that might be considered to address workforce readiness in Georgia, along with some considerations for how policy makers and legislators in our state might productively work alongside teachers in improving students’ literacy rates. To collect this data, I interviewed one 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, one 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts teacher, and one 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade language arts and AP literature teacher, all of whom work in Georgia. I also interviewed a professor from the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia, whose research focuses on literacy assessment. In addition to their thoughts and feedback, I am including my own understandings of literacy assessment based on my classroom experiences. I taught middle and high school language arts, reading intervention, and English as a second language for 11 years before leaving the classroom to pursue my PhD. I am also drawing on understandings developed through an ongoing research project into how literacy teachers understand effective teaching.

### *Indicators*

I asked teachers for their reactions to the following indicators of literacy learning: kindergarten readiness, 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading and 8<sup>th</sup> grade math as assessed by NAEP, and post high school completion rates. I also asked them to share what other indicators of literacy learning they use in their practice and find meaningful. I will quickly summarize the indicators that teachers do not find meaningful, followed by some recommendations for those that they do find helpful.

Teachers were not familiar with NAEP exams, though some had heard of the nation’s report card. Because these exams are only given at selected schools across the state, and because Georgia’s most recent scores are on par with the scores of the nation as a whole, this metric has not gained attention in these teachers’ schools and does not hold meaning for the teachers I spoke with. This is in line with my own experiences. Despite teaching in three different states, I was previously unfamiliar with NAEP exams and have never worked in a school where they were administered. Teachers did not know what the format of this exam looked like, how it assessed literacy, or how

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their own students would perform on the exam, making it an unreliable metric for them.

When asked what indicators of literacy teachers *did* rely on, they were quick to explain that they do not find Georgia Milestones testing helpful when trying to assess the growth of their students working below grade level, or when looking at the growth and progress of individual students. This exam is designed to assess the particular grade level it is administered in. It is not adaptive to students' skill levels, and therefore results only show whether or not students have met learning standards within their grade level. This is helpful to teachers who are looking for trends across the grade. For example, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts teacher I spoke to explained that she looks to Milestones results to see trends in her students' results. However, because these results come during the summer, they are not a particularly useful tool for her instructional planning. The elementary teacher explained that Milestones is "just a short snapshot" of what students were able to produce on one particular day, and that it has some value in looking for trends and making generalizations, but not for assessing the growth of particular students. These teachers also both noted that they cannot use Milestones to determine growth of students who are working significantly below grade level because it is not adaptive and does not demonstrate growth occurring above or below the level of the exam, making this test a misfit for assessing the success of literacy intervention plans or programming designed to support low-level readers.

Teachers did have some recommendations for data and assessments that they do find useful when evaluating literacy growth and reading levels. The professor that I interviewed emphasized the importance of formative assessments, which allow teachers to adapt their instruction and see growth over time. This concept of growth as key to teachers' understanding of literacy development was repeated by everyone I spoke to, and resonates with my own classroom experiences. Literacy teachers attend to growth over time, and value any type of assessment that demonstrates the complexity of literacy development and reports even small degrees of student growth. Educators understand that literacy develops in progressive stages along a continuum, and that individuals move through those stages with vastly different pacing. Some students move quickly through early literacy development, and then more slowly through later stages, some do the opposite, and some keep up a fairly consistent pace throughout. This is well understood by literacy educators, and so what they look for is whether a student is progressing, either toward or beyond their grade level learning standards. Literacy educators work to both adapt our instruction so that readers at different levels of literacy can engage with our classroom materials, and we seek out multiple data sources and metrics when trying to gauge a particular student's progress and reading level. Formative assessments, mostly made by teachers themselves in connection with their classroom materials, are the most helpful indicator for this growth. Teachers at the middle and high school level explained that their formative assessments often include written and verbal responses to texts, and the elementary teacher emphasized the point that formatives provide her with the most valuable data for assessing literacy.

When asked what types of summative assessments are useful in determining literacy growth and reading levels, the elementary teacher said that [iReady](#), an adaptive computer based exam, provides some helpful information. She emphasized again that it was only helpful when considered alongside other metrics, but explained that because it adjusts to students' reading and skill levels, this can be a

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helpful tool for gauging student growth and progress. She clarified that it has not been helpful as an instructional tool, only for assessment. The middle school teacher similarly explained that her students did not like using iReady during their extended learning time because it is designed for younger students. She found that some students rushed through the diagnostic portion of the exam, or spent a great deal of time and effort on it, and ended up with inaccurate results on both ends of this spectrum, which in turn made them feel bored or frustrated when working through lessons based on those diagnostic results. The high school teacher was unfamiliar with iReady. An adaptive computer-based exam that is used more often at the secondary level, including in the schools I taught in, is [NWEA's MAP](#) exam. MAP can provide helpful data because it adjusts to students' reading levels, so it provides more accurate results than a non-adaptive standardized exam. However, the same concerns arise as previously mentioned about iReady—that if students do not complete the diagnostic carefully, they can end up with inaccurate results. That challenge can be mitigated by considering MAP results along with multiple other formative measures. The last exam that was specifically mentioned was [Fountas & Pinnell](#), a system for conducting running records to determine students' reading levels. The elementary teacher uses this in her school and explained that it can be a useful tool, but that it is both subjective and time-consuming. Again, she emphasized that when the results are combined with her own understanding of students' reading levels from formative classroom assessments, the data can be very useful. The clear message throughout these responses was that any metric alone will be unreliable, but that multiple measures considered together can provide educators with a more holistic understanding of student growth, reading level, and literacy skills.

Lastly, speaking of literacy rates in Georgia must encompass a consideration of our emergent bilingual students, students who are still learning and gaining fluency with English. These students are given the same exams as their peers who are fluent in English, and their scores relate to their level of proficiency. Any conversation about a fluctuation in literacy rates in Georgia must also consider how the population of emergent bilingual students and their rates of proficiency are necessarily influencing those changes. With all of these considerations for student growth and assessment in mind, I now turn to how Georgia legislators might productively work alongside teachers in promoting literacy development.

### *Working Alongside Teachers*

The recommendation that I heard most often is that teachers both want and deserve to be treated as the expert in their content area. Teachers in Georgia go through an extensive certification process and feel confident in their ability to design and implement meaningful literacy instruction for students. They feel that the biggest impediment to their work are the accountability procedures and policies in place in their schools, such as those that require particular exams, scripted curricula, or whole-school intervention programs. The teachers I spoke with were wary of any policy or guidelines that might communicate to children that they are failing in their literacy growth if they are not meeting grade-level expectations. They were also against any action that might implement more assessments for students, as they feel that students are already over-tested. What teachers hope for, instead, is support from school administrators, literacy coaches, and community members as they work to design their own instructional practices and materials. They explained that when they are

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able to use assessments as tools for instruction, rather than for accountability purposes, those exams then become useful to their practice. They also explained that they appreciate having ample choices for curricular and exam materials to use in their classrooms, as they work to adapt their instruction to different students' needs. One person I spoke to said that teachers should be offered a "buffet" of instructional tools. They also told me that the pressure on exam performance was immensely stressful to them and their students, and feel that it keeps them from developing students' literacy skills in authentic ways that would translate to the workforce.

The elementary teacher I spoke with said she appreciated any attention on early literacy development, specifically in pre-K and kindergarten. She said that, as a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, she saw how students were entering kindergarten with very different skill levels, and that free and accessible pre-K was an important asset in her school community. The high school teacher brought up the important point that disciplinary literacies (i.e. literacies in other content areas including math and science) would be important to consider in relation to workforce readiness. There are distinct best practices for teaching literacy in each content area, and these could be practiced with teachers through professional development.

Teachers also explained that, in order for them to work alongside policy makers and legislators, they would expect for the processes in policymaking and legislation to be transparent. The high school teacher I spoke with explained that she sees a disconnect between the processes she is asked to go through to keep her teaching curricula and practices transparent for her school administration and for parents, but that she does not feel the same level of transparency has been practiced in Georgia's education policy-making processes. She and the other teachers all expressed that, for them to want to engage with legislators or policy makers around literacy improvement in any capacity, they would first need to understand how policymakers were defining or identifying a need related to literacy. They would want an accessible way to understand what the goal of the new policy was, what need or problem it was designed to address, how that need or problem was identified, and how the need or problem is specifically present in their contexts. To get fully on board with any new policy or practice, teachers will need to be engaged from the ground level of the process, and feel that their voice is heard. They are, after all, the experts in their content areas, and so any policy that attempts to define a problem related to literacy can also be read as criticism of their work. To avoid that, engaging teachers in the process of identifying a literacy need and in developing a solution for that need would have a largely positive affect on how diligently teachers implement any new policy or intervention.