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OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY

## REVIEW OF FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY SKILLS PLANS



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## Background

The 112<sup>th</sup> Tennessee General Assembly convened for a special session on education in January 2021 to address issues facing Tennessee students and schools. The three-day session produced three new laws aimed at addressing literacy, accountability, and learning loss resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. One bill, Public Chapter 3, replaced the Tennessee Literacy Initiative Act of 1999 with the Tennessee Literacy Success Act. The act seeks to improve literacy rates by implementing a new framework for the state and districts to use in identifying and assisting students found to have significant reading deficiencies.

Foundational literacy skills instruction is an evidence-based method of teaching students to read that includes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The Tennessee Literacy Success Act requires this type of instruction to be the primary form of English language arts (ELA) instruction to students in grades K-3. The act required each school district and public charter school to develop a foundational literacy skills plan (FLSP) for students in grades K-5 and submit it to the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) by June 1, 2021. School districts and charter schools are required to submit a revised plan every three years beginning July 1, 2024. Districts that meet certain student academic growth criteria as shown through Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) data are exempt from the requirement.

Each FLSP must include, at a minimum:

- the amount of daily time devoted to foundational literacy skills instruction and a description of how the instructional time is used;
- the ELA textbooks and instructional materials adopted by the school district;
- the universal reading screener selected by the school district for administration to students;
- a description of the reading interventions and supports available to students with a significant reading deficiency;
- how the school district intends to notify and engage parents in student literacy progress; and
- how the school district will provide professional development in foundational literacy skills instruction to teachers in grades K-5.

Additionally, the plans must not include instructional materials created to align with common core academic standards.

The act required the State Board of Education (SBE), in consultation with TDOE, to establish the guidelines and requirements for the FLSPs. Each plan approved by TDOE must be posted on the websites of the department and each school district.

By November 1, 2021 (and every November 1 thereafter), the Comptroller of the Treasury must conduct a review of the foundational literacy skills plans submitted to TDOE to ensure the plans comply with the requirements established in law and the rules set by SBE.

## Review of foundational literacy skills plans (FLSPs)

The initial FLSPs were submitted, approved, and posted on the TDOE website in May of 2021. Using an electronic application, district representatives submitted narrative responses to eight prompts and attached six artifacts, or examples of documents used by the district. (See Exhibit 1.)

## Exhibit 1: FLSP application sections and requirements

Section	Requirements
<b>Daily foundational skills instructional time: grades K-2</b>  -Artifact 1: grades K-2 master schedule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aligned with TN standards</li> <li>• Minimum 45 minutes foundational skills instruction daily</li> <li>• Foundational skills instruction demonstrated as <i>primary</i> form of instruction</li> <li>• Explicit instruction and student practice in fluency, vocabulary, phonemic awareness, phonics, and comprehension</li> </ul>
<b>Daily foundational skills instructional time: grades 3-5</b>  -Artifact 2: grades 3-5 master schedule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aligned with TN standards (including morphology, grammar, spelling, writing, and fluency)</li> <li>• Minimum 30 minutes of dedicated foundational skills instruction</li> <li>• Explicit supports for fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension</li> </ul>
<b>Adopted foundational skills instructional materials: grades K-2 and grades 3-5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Included on SBE approved list and include complete alignment to foundational skills standards</li> <li>• Waiver for materials not on the approved list</li> <li>• Alignment of optional supplemental resources to TN state standards and fully address phonological awareness and phonemic awareness</li> </ul>
<b>Universal reading screener</b> Note: Districts may use the universal screener provided by the state or another approved screener.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compliance with dyslexia screening requirements in TCA 49-1-229</li> <li>• Compliance with requirements in TN's RTI<sup>2</sup> framework manual</li> <li>• Three screening assessments yearly</li> </ul>
<b>RTI<sup>2</sup> reading intervention structure</b>  -Artifact 3: intervention schedule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aligned with expectations in TN's RTI<sup>2</sup> framework manual</li> <li>• Evidence-based interventions differentiated by Tier II and III</li> <li>• Address specific students' skill gaps and monitor specific gaps for student improvement</li> <li>• Data teams use progress monitoring data to inform decisions about duration, material, and intensity changes when a student is not showing progress</li> </ul>
<b>Parent notification plan: home literacy reports</b>  -Artifact 4: sample letter for grades K-3 -Artifact 5: sample letter for grades 4-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explains student scores in parent-friendly language</li> <li>• Provides clear explanation of student skill gaps and the depth and extent of student need</li> <li>• Provides info about how skill gaps will be addressed during intervention</li> <li>• Provides no-cost reading activities to families to support children at home</li> <li>• Includes clear plan to communicate with parents three times a year in grades K-3 and annually in grades 4-5</li> <li>• Explains importance of reading proficiency by end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade</li> </ul>
<b>Professional development (PD) plan for teachers</b>  -Artifact 6: PD calendar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PD provides deep training to teachers on foundational skills instruction grounded in phonics-based approach</li> <li>• Equivalent of one week</li> <li>• Includes phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary</li> <li>• Requires teachers to demonstrate knowledge and competency</li> <li>• Experienced providers deeply trained in materials with proven track record of supporting districts in foundational skills instruction</li> <li>• Absent of cueing or MSV strategies<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>

Note: To view the application sections and requirements in full, see <https://www.tn.gov/education/instruction/foundational-literacy-skills-plan>.

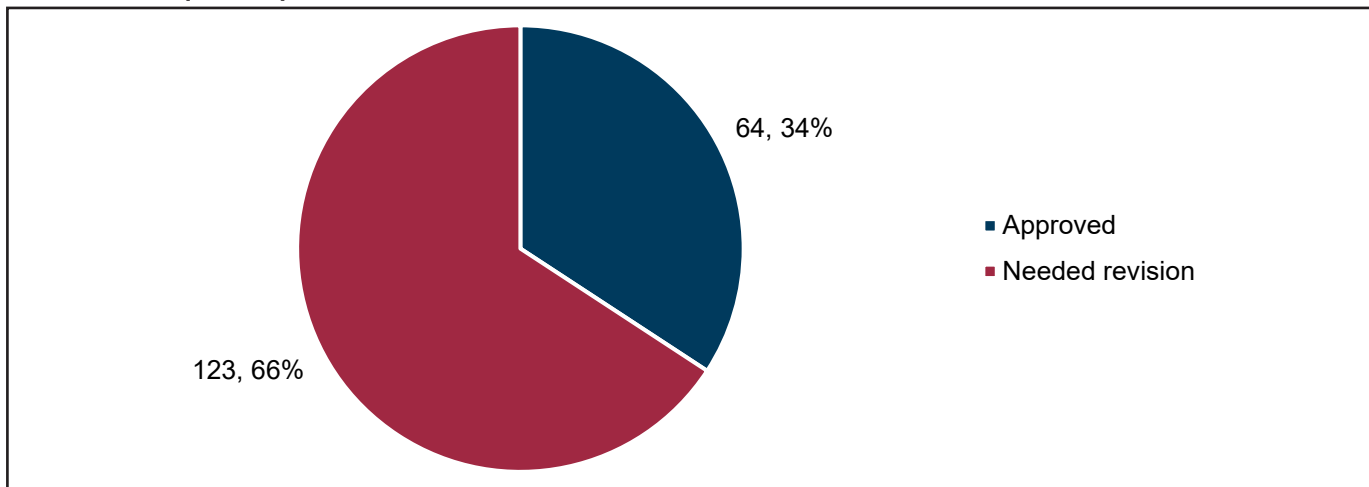
Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

<sup>1</sup> Cueing is a teaching strategy in which teachers prompt students to draw on multiple sources of information to identify words. MSV is an acronym for the three sources of information: meaning drawn from context or pictures, structure/syntax, and visual information, such as letters or parts of words.

TDOE evaluators reviewed each plan based on scoring rubrics, indicating items that needed revision and commenting with specific instructions. Approved sections did not require further action from the district, but all other sections had to be resubmitted after revisions were made.

The FLSPs of 58 districts were approved in the first round of submissions, leaving 85 (or 59 percent) that were sent back by TDOE to districts for revision. Six charter school FLSPs were approved upon first submission, and 38 plans (or 86 percent) needed to be revised. Overall, TDOE evaluators found that 66 percent of the initially submitted plans needed revisions.

**Exhibit 2: Districts and charter school FLSPs approved by TDOE evaluators at first submission (n=187)**



Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

The most common reason plans were not initially approved was an issue with parent notification requirements. Approximately 46 percent of these plans were required to add language to bring their plans into compliance with the new law's requirements. For example, several plans needed to be revised to emphasize to parents the importance of reading proficiency by 3rd grade and/or to include no-cost activities for families to support learning at home. Districts and charter schools were often required to revise the sample letters to be used in communicating this information to parents. Almost 35 percent of districts had to revise the sample letter for grades K-3, and 41 percent were required to revise the sample letter for grades 4-5.

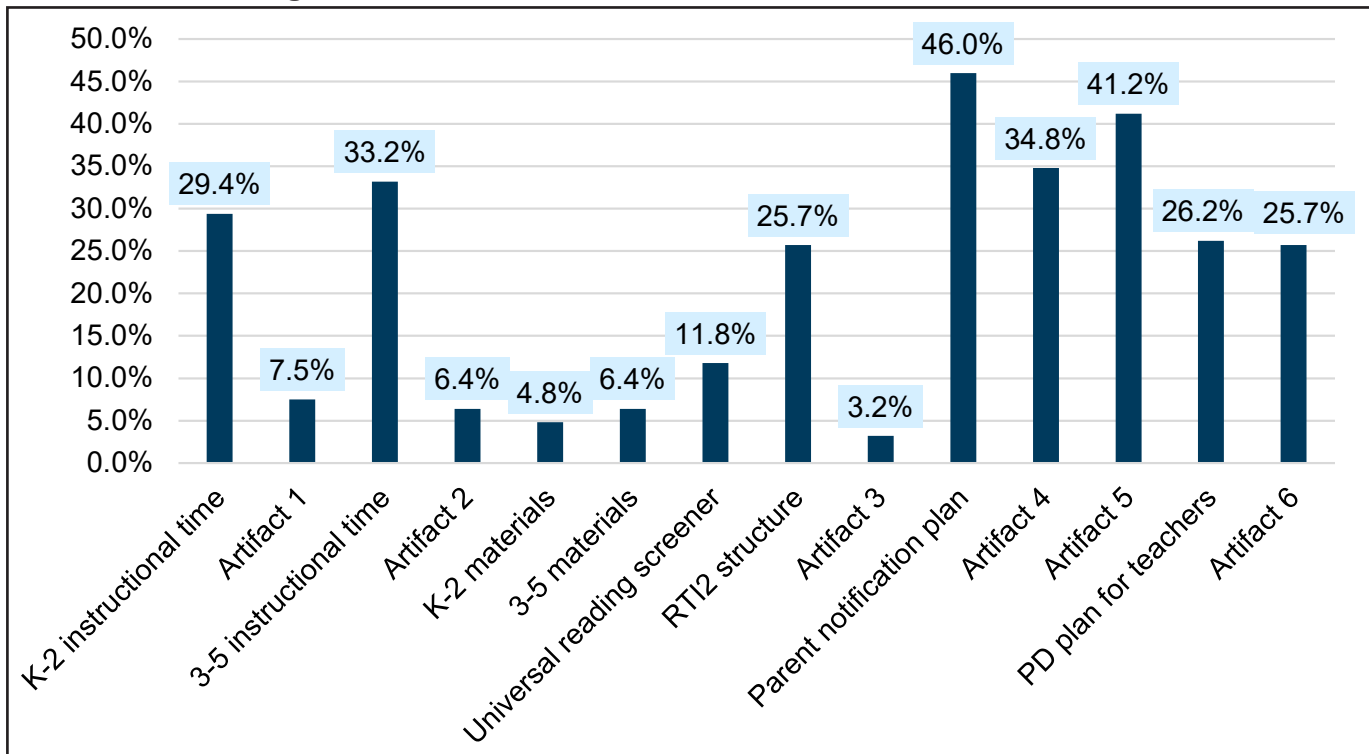
Around 30 percent of districts and charter schools needed to revise the instructional time plans for daily foundational skills for grades K-2 and 3-5. Some plans did not budget an adequate amount of time for foundational skills instruction (e.g., budgeting 20 minutes of time instead of the required minimum of 30). Several districts and charter schools were required to add specific words to their plans to match Tennessee state standards, including the terms morphology,<sup>2</sup> grammar, spelling, writing, and fluency. In most cases, submitters had to update the plan's narrative only and not the master schedules they provided.

Around 26 percent of districts and charter schools had to update their professional development plan and calendar for teachers after their first submissions. Some did not specify that *all* K-5 teachers would receive training on phonics-based foundational skills instruction, as required by law, and were required to update their plans to include all teachers. Some plans had to be revised to indicate the training provider has a proven track record of supporting districts and that teachers would be required to demonstrate knowledge and competency.

Almost 26 percent of districts and charter schools needed to revise the section on RTI<sup>2</sup> reading intervention structures. In most cases, the narrative needed revision (e.g., updated to reflect compliance with Tennessee's RTI<sup>2</sup> framework manual), but the intervention schedule included as artifact three met the criteria.

<sup>2</sup> Morphology is the study of the forms of words. Students learn by segmenting words into affixes (prefixes and suffixes) and the roots or base words.

**Exhibit 3: Percentage of districts that needed to revise section after first FLSP submission**



Source: OREA review of TDOE data.

## Summary

Following the initial round of evaluations, districts with FLSPs that were not approved submitted revised plans and, in some cases, worked with TDOE staff to bring the plans into compliance. As of July 2021, the FLSPs of all but one of the state's districts and public charter schools had been approved.

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