

MASP Position Statement: Approaches to Reading Instruction in Manitoba Schools June 2024

The Manitoba Association of School Psychologists (MASP) upholds the highest standards of professional practice, following the guidelines set forth by the Canadian Psychological Association^{1, 2} and those by the Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning's Professional Certification Unit³. As dedicated professionals committed to all students' well-being and academic success, we are ethically bound to recommend instructional strategies that align with best practices in the field and implement interventions grounded in empirical evidence^{1, 2}. Regarding reading instruction, the Supreme Court of Canada unanimously agreed that learning to read is a basic and essential human right, not a privilege⁴. MASP supports the recommendations outlined in the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) Right to Read⁴ and recommends that educational practices in Manitoba adhere to the latest research findings in effective literacy instruction to support all readers.

Reading achievement is closely tied to the quality of instruction students receive^{5, 6}. By prioritizing early intervention and adhering to the latest research in literacy development, we can mitigate the lifelong consequences associated with reading difficulties, such as poorer academic performance^{7, 8, 9}, fewer employment opportunities^{10, 11, 12}, increased dropout rates^{13, 14}, and heightened risk of incarceration^{11, 15}. Research consistently shows that most students can achieve reading proficiency when given access to evidence-based, systematic, and explicit instruction in foundational reading skills^{16, 17, 18, 19}.

MASP endorses instructional programs prioritizing a structured literacy approach^{20, 21}, as it aligns with the scientifically proven principles of reading development and the most effective strategies for teaching children to read^{19, 22, 23}. These programs provide targeted instruction in essential areas, including phonological and phonemic awareness, letter-sound correspondences, and vocabulary development^{19, 21, 24}. By prioritizing the mastery of the alphabetic code and fundamental processes such as blending and segmenting, these approaches establish the groundwork for proficient reading, comprehension, spelling, and writing abilities.

Furthermore, when integrated into a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework, structured literacy provides a responsive and differentiated approach to addressing learners' diverse needs^{16, 25, 26, 27}. This integration is essential for ensuring equitable access to literacy instruction for all students, including those with diverse learning profiles and cultural backgrounds^{28, 29}. Adherence to the latest research in literacy development and effective teaching is vital for preventing, identifying, and remedying reading difficulties. Specific Learning Disorders (SLD) like dyslexia³⁰, frequently addressed by school psychologists, benefit from evidence-based practices in structured literacy³¹. Thus, embracing a structured literacy approach enhances literacy outcomes for struggling readers and supports all students' academic success and well-being.

MASP does not endorse scientifically disproven literacy development models, including the whole language or 'balanced literacy' approach, which often relies on the three-cueing system for word recognition. Such approaches lack empirical support, undermine effective literacy instruction, and may hinder rather than facilitate student reading development^{25, 31, 32, 33}. The

three-cueing system encourages using cues like pictures, sentence structure, and the first letter of a word to guess unknown words, which are ineffective and inefficient strategies^{33, 34}.

Considering the consistently low literacy scores among Manitoba students^{35,36,37} and the ongoing ambiguity surrounding literacy instruction in the province, we advocate for comprehensive reforms at both the policy and practice levels. MASP underscores the significance of embracing a structured literacy approach, encompassing explicit teaching of phonics, phonemic awareness, and spelling to enhance both reading comprehension and fluency. Additionally, we stress the need for adequate support and resources for educators to effectively implement evidence-based literacy practices, including professional development opportunities and access to instructional materials aligned with best practices.

In summary, our position is grounded in professional ethics, informed by relevant research and legal mandates, and aimed at fostering equitable learning opportunities for every learner. As professionals dedicated to ongoing learning and professional development, MASP acknowledges the need to regularly update this position statement to incorporate the latest scientific research findings and emerging best practices in literacy education. MASP urges its members to remain informed, exchange insights on effective literacy methodologies, and engage with knowledge users throughout Manitoba's educational sphere to guarantee equitable access to high-quality literacy instruction for all students. By working together and aligning our efforts with evidence-based practices, we can create a learning environment where all students have the opportunity to thrive academically and beyond.

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