

Four-Step Literacy Health Check for Schools and Districts (Secondary Level)

STEP 1

Analyze Your Data

An overall reading proficiency level below 95% is a signal for action. Here are key areas to investigate:

How many students are reading at the 3rd–4th grade level (the “4th–grade slump”)?

- These students may have underdeveloped decoding skills and likely need targeted phonics and decoding instruction before they can succeed in comprehension-focused interventions.
- Refer to **Step 2** below for additional hints on identifying this issue.

Which students fall into the Basic and Below Basic categories on assessments?

- **Basic:** These students have likely moved beyond decoding challenges and can focus on comprehension interventions.
- **Below Basic:** These students may still struggle with decoding and require targeted intervention to address foundational skill gaps.

Can all students decode multisyllabic words easily?

- An oral reading fluency (ORF) rate **below** 90 words correct per minute (wcpm) may indicate weak decoding skills and a need for targeted foundational literacy support.

How many students require Tier 3 or special education services?

- These striving readers benefit from structured, multisensory instruction grounded in Orton-Gillingham principles.

STEP 2

Observe Classroom Practices

Visit classrooms and intervention periods across grades 6–12. Consider these questions:

Is grade-level content being taught?

- Are teachers able to use grade-level materials, or do they rely on alternative texts due to lower student proficiency?
- If many students need alternative materials, they are likely experiencing the “4th grade slump.”

How well are students engaging with grade-level texts independently?

- If many students are reading alternative or simplified texts, a broader intervention strategy may be necessary.

What strategies does the teacher utilize when students struggle with reading?

- Are teachers primarily addressing comprehension challenges? If so, they may be overlooking students with decoding difficulties.
- Are resources provided for a range of skills, including decoding? Review the materials being used.

Are teachers allowing time for both types of practice?

- First, are students getting **purposeful practice** to reinforce recently taught skills?
- Second, do students engage in **ongoing independent practice** with “just-right” connected texts matched to their skill level?

Are you leveraging educational technology to personalize instruction and practice?

- It is not possible for one teacher to personalize instruction and practice for every student.
- Technology can support differentiated reading practice and provide teachers with data to guide instruction.

STEP 3

Review Your Reading Intervention Materials

Examine your reading intervention materials for grades 6–12, focusing on these areas:

For Students Who Haven't Mastered Decoding

- Ensure your program is grounded in the science of reading, offering structured literacy with explicit instruction across all five pillars of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension).
- Look for a systematic, cumulative scope and sequence with age-appropriate materials for older students.
- Verify that multisensory strategies are incorporated for Tier 3 and special education.

Practice Resources:

- Provide decodable texts for skill reinforcement, as needed.
- Enable independent practice opportunities with just-right connected texts to integrate skills, enrich vocabulary, and build background knowledge.

Assessment Tools:

- Use screeners to identify students lacking decoding skills. Be cautious of assessments that report decoding-related scores without including actual decoding tasks, as this can lead to misinterpretation.
- Track student progress using both benchmarks and formative assessments.



STEP 4

Evaluate Access and Resources

Develop a strategic plan to meet all students' literacy needs, considering available staff and time.

Are all students who need support receiving it?

- Ensure staffing levels allow for small-group or 1:1 intervention as needed.

Should you consider whole-class or large-group interventions?

- Based on the number of striving readers, consider whether interventions should be delivered in mainstream classes for all students.

Professional Learning and Support:

- Ensure staff are trained in structured literacy as well as multisensory strategies Tier 3 and special education.
- Consider training paraprofessionals to assist with literacy instruction and offer ongoing professional learning and support for all staff.

Every student deserves to be a confident, capable reader. Prioritize providing the right resources and interventions to 100% of your students.

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