

Legislative Report

Iowa Reading Research Center 2025

IOWA | Department of Education



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Introduction

Legislative Authority

The legislative priorities of the Iowa Reading Research Center (IRRC) are written into Iowa Code section 256.9(49)(c) and Iowa Administrative Code rule 281–79.9(256).

Section 256.9(49)(c). Establish, subject to an appropriation of funds by the general assembly, an Iowa reading research center which shall collaborate with the area education agencies in implementing the provisions of this paragraph “c”.

(1) The purpose of the center shall be to apply current research on literacy to provide for the development and dissemination of all of the following:

(a) Instructional strategies for prekindergarten through grade twelve to achieve literacy proficiency that includes reading, reading comprehension, and writing for all students.

(b) Strategies for identifying and providing evidence-based interventions for students, beginning in kindergarten, who are at risk of not achieving literacy proficiency

(c) Models for effective school and community partnerships to improve student literacy

(d) Reading assessments

(e) Professional development strategies and materials to support teacher effectiveness in student literacy development. Subject to an appropriation of funds by the general assembly, the center shall collaborate and coordinate with the area education agencies and the department to develop and offer to school districts at no cost professional development services to enhance the skills of elementary teachers in the use of evidence-based strategies to improve the literacy skills of all students.

(f) Data reports on attendance center, school district, and statewide progress toward literacy proficiency in the context of student, attendance center, and school district demographic characteristics.

(g) An intensive summer literacy program. The center shall establish program criteria and guidelines for implementation of the program by school districts, under rules adopted by the state board pursuant to section 256.7, subsection 31.

(2) The first efforts of the center shall focus on kindergarten through grade three. The center shall draw upon national and state expertise in the field of literacy proficiency, including experts from Iowa’s institutions of higher education and area education agencies with backgrounds in literacy development. The center shall seek support from the Iowa research community in data report development and analysis of available information from Iowa education data sources. The center shall work with the department to identify additional needs for tools and technical assistance for Iowa schools to help schools achieve literacy proficiency goals and seek public and private partnerships in developing and accessing necessary tools and technical assistance.

(3) The center shall submit a detailed annual financial report, a description of the center’s activities for the prior fiscal year, and a statement of its proposed and projected activities to the general assembly by January 15 annually.

The University of Iowa

The University of Iowa (UI) hosts the IRRC as one of the nation's top public research universities, thus providing an academic base for the center director as well as resources to support its continued growth. UI is the fiscal agent and provides office space for IRRC staff.

Communication Methods

IRRC disseminates research findings and research-based resources through various ways to maximize impact and reach a broad audience. Communication methods include the [IRRC website](#) and [IRRC blog](#); IRRC social media accounts ([X](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#)); traditional media (e.g., print newspapers and radio interviews); new media (e.g., podcasts and online videos); monthly IRRC email newsletters; hosting the Iowa Science of Reading Summit and in-person presentations at schools, area education agencies (AEAs) and conferences.

Reading Research Stakeholders

IRRC conducts research in support of literacy education efforts across Iowa. Activities address the needs and concerns of the major stakeholders in the state, including:

- K-12 students
- Families
- Educators
- School districts (local education agencies)
- Nonpublic schools
- AEAs
- Iowa's public and private institutes of higher education
- Community organizations
- Iowa Department of Education (Department)
- Professional organizations

In addition, the IRRC Advisory Council meets three times per year, as required. The Department director or the director's designee appoints the council members, and members serve four-year terms.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2025, the IRRC Advisory Council met on Sept. 18, 2024, Dec. 12, 2024 and April 23, 2025. The council's members represent a cross-section of organizations and institutions supporting reading practices in the state and are listed in the following table.

IRRC FY25 Members

| Organization Type | Name | Organization |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|---|
| Institute of Higher Education | Gwen Marra | Dordt University |
| Institute of Higher Education | Papae Wymore | Central College |
| Department of Education | McKenzie Snow | Iowa Department of Education |
| Department of Education | Wanda Steuri | Iowa Department of Education |
| AEA | Jason Plourde | Green Hills AEA |
| School District | Beth Happe | Martensdale-St. Marys Community School District |
| Accredited Nonpublic School | Kathleen Konrardy | Holy Family Catholic Schools |
| School District | Erick Pruitt | Ankeny Community School District |
| School District | Stacey Cole | Storm Lake Community School District |
| Community-Based Nonprofit | Mindy VanZuiden | Decoding Dyslexia Iowa |
| Parent | Cori Stanley | Indianola Community School District |

IRRC Implementation of Reading Practices

IRRC conducts the following types of applied research and literacy supports in collaboration with stakeholders:

- Research to guide the development of practices and products (e.g., intervention procedures and assessments)
- Research to inform the effective implementation of literacy policy and practice
- Research to evaluate the impact of literacy policy and practice
- Delivery of professional development to Iowa educators in both virtual and in-person settings

IRRC works in partnership with the Department, and legislative action and IRRC Advisory Council recommendations guide its priorities. The following table provides a description of IRRC's FY25 projects and activities listed by Iowa Administrative Code citations.

IRRC FY25 Projects & Activities

| Iowa Administrative Code Citation(s) | Projects & Activities |
|---|---|
| Instructional strategies for prekindergarten - grade 12: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(a) Evidence-based interventions for students: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(b) Professional development strategies and materials: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(e) | <p><u>Literacy LIFTER (Letter Identification and Formation for Transcription and Early Reading)</u></p> <p>Developed online application (Literacy LIFTER) to empower educators and caregivers supporting handwriting and early reading skills, including evidence-based materials such as video models of letter formation and pronunciation, downloadable worksheets, eLearning modules and blog posts.</p> |
| Instructional strategies for prekindergarten - grade 12: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(a) Evidence-based interventions for students: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(b) Professional development strategies and materials: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(e) | <p><u>Literacy CLIFTER (Cursive Letter Identification and Formation for Transcription and Early Reading)</u></p> <p>Developed online application (Literacy CLIFTER) to empower educators and caregivers supporting cursive handwriting, including evidence-based materials such as video models of letter formation and pronunciation, downloadable worksheets, eLearning modules, blog posts and online webinars.</p> <p>Conducted systematic review of prior research on cursive writing instruction in order to identify effective instructional practices.</p> |

| Iowa Administrative Code Citation(s) | Projects & Activities |
|---|--|
| <p>Models for effective school and community partnerships: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(c) Evidence-based interventions for students: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(b) Reading assessments: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(d)</p> | <p><u>Caregiver Data Literacy</u> Developed the eLearning module “Understanding Your Student’s Literacy Data” for parents and caregivers to better understand types of literacy assessments and related terms and facilitate effective school-home partnerships around students’ literacy data.</p> <p>Created the Caregiver Data Discussion Tool to help parents and caregivers meaningfully participate in meetings with teachers about their child’s literacy.</p> <p>Launched the Educator Letter Builder, a customizable letter generator to help educators explain a student’s universal screening results to parents and caregivers.</p> <p>Distributed a statewide survey to understand Iowa parent and caregiver knowledge and perceptions of literacy assessments and data.</p> <p>Conducted a systematic review of U.S. legislation on personalized reading plans nationwide.</p> |
| <p>Professional development strategies and materials: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(e) Reading assessments: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(d) Evidence-based interventions for students: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(b)</p> | <p><u>Core Data-Based Decision-Making</u> Developed an online tool (Tier 1.5 calculator), three foundational knowledge-building posts and two accompanying blog posts on data-based decision-making to help educators identify Tier 1 classrooms that could benefit from a class-wide intervention.</p> |
| <p>Professional development strategies and materials: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(e) Models for effective school and community partnerships: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(c) Instructional strategies for prekindergarten – grade 12: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(a)</p> | <p><u>Measure FIRST (Fidelity of Implementation and Reading Skills of Teachers)</u> Created a free online tool for instructional coaches and administrators to measure opportunities to respond during classroom observations.</p> <p>Published five accompanying blog posts to support positive fidelity monitoring.</p> <p>Initiated a systematic review on fidelity practices and instructional alignment across the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) to identify evidence-based best practices for supplemental literacy interventions.</p> |
| <p>Professional development strategies and materials: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(e)</p> | <p><u>Reading Instruction and Knowledge (RIK) for Pre-service Teachers</u> Initiated development of the Studying the Science of Reading Practice Assessment to support formative assessment of pre-service teachers’ understanding of evidence-based literacy instruction and assessment. This resource is aligned to the Foundations of Reading test.</p> |

| Iowa Administrative Code Citation(s) | Projects & Activities |
|--|--|
| <p>Dyslexia Senate File 2319, Chapter 1077 Senate File 2356</p> <p>Professional development strategies and materials: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(e)</p> | <p><u>Dyslexia & Dyslexia Specialist Endorsement</u></p> <p>Provided required Dyslexia Overview eLearning module to over 39,000 pre-service and in-service educators in Iowa since the release of the module in 2018.</p> <p>Taught Dyslexia Specialist Endorsement courses through the University of Iowa.</p> <p>Continued providing free consultation and support to Iowa families with questions about reading literacy, resources, dyslexia and other reading disabilities. Families met with staff virtually or in-person for caregiver support consultation.</p> <p>Provided support to institutes of higher education offering Dyslexia Specialist Endorsement programs.</p> <p>Developed training materials for teachers that recommend additional diagnostics and instructional strategies based on class-wide universal screening scores.</p> <p>Participated in the Iowa Dyslexia Board, per Iowa Code section 256.32A. Partnered with the Department and Sterling Literacy Consulting to provide guidance on the creation of the Iowa Dyslexia Handbook.</p> |
| <p>Professional development strategies and materials: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(e) Models for effective school and community partnerships: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(c) Data reports: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(f) Instructional strategies for prekindergarten - grade 12: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(a)</p> | <p><u>School Partnerships</u></p> <p>Created 17 district partnerships to provide no-cost professional development and data analysis services.</p> <p>Provided technical assistance to more than 2,600 educators on core literacy practices and curricula. Example topics included: executing a district-wide curriculum review, fidelity monitoring for implementing reading instructional materials and Secondary literacy instruction across content areas.</p> <p>Continued a three-year partnership with Ankeny Community School District to evaluate the effectiveness of a structured literacy training program and curriculum change.</p> |
| <p>Professional development strategies and materials: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(e)</p> | <p><u>Iowa Science of Reading Summit</u></p> <p>Facilitated the second Iowa Science of Reading Summit. Over the course of two days, 700 participants gathered to learn about evidence-based literacy instruction, literacy assessments, data-based decision-making, MTSS, implementation science, literacy leadership and the cognitive foundations of reading.</p> |

| Iowa Administrative Code Citation(s) | Projects & Activities |
|--|--|
| <p>Professional development strategies and materials: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(e)</p> <p>Models for effective school and community partnerships: Section 256.9(49)(c)(1)(c)</p> | <p><u>Dissemination: Maintenance, Updating, & Creating</u></p> <p>Administered the delivery of more than 3,000 eLearning modules focused on tools for teachers to implement evidence-based reading instruction in their classroom, including “Teacher Tools for Universally Implementing Structured Literacy Content.”</p> <p>Published 22 blog posts on reading instruction. Notable posts include: “Handwriting: Beneficial to Reading, Often Misunderstood,” “Reading Assessments and Their Purposes,” “Looping Back to Cursive Handwriting” and “Fidelity in School Settings: How it Works and Why it Matters.”</p> <p>Increased online engagement through content on social media channels, with content displayed to users more than 1 million times, leading to more than 469,000 views of the IRRC website.</p> <p>Sent a monthly IRRC newsletter to 2,439 recipients, including librarians, school principals, teachers, AEA staff, higher education faculty and staff and school district personnel.</p> <p>Launched the “Ask IRRC” video series answering common literacy questions and garnering 8,000 views.</p> <p>Offered workshops focused on dyslexia and reading instruction for pre-service teachers at UI and remote attendees across the state.</p> <p>Attended, presented and/or exhibited at conferences, including the Iowa Science of Reading Summit, Decoding Dyslexia Iowa Conference, Iowa Association for Colleges of Teacher Education, Southeast Iowa Educators Conference, Council for Learning Disabilities, Council for Exceptional Children, Plain Talk, Society for the Scientific Study of Reading Conference and Pacific Coast Research Conference.</p> |

New IRRC Interim Director

In November 2025, Dr. John Speer was named IRRC interim director. He had retired from a 31-year education career that June. One month later, in July of 2025, he was hired by UI as an assistant clinical professor in the Education Policy and Leadership Studies program.

Prior to his IRRC appointment, Speer worked in K-12 schools for 31 years as a teacher, principal, superintendent and an AEA chief administrator. He spent 26 of those 31 years as a school administrator, with 14 as a superintendent and the final seven years as chief administrator of Grant Wood AEA. In those roles, he built long-standing relationships with public and private district leaders, teachers, AEAs, professional associations aligned with K-12 education and caregiver groups statewide.

Speer's extensive career, significant statewide partnerships and deep understanding of the core needs of K-12 schools provide a strong foundation for expanding and aligning IRRC's reach and efforts with the needs of Iowa educators, families and policymakers. Throughout FY25, IRRC has continued to strengthen its three cornerstones—technical assistance, dissemination of research and applied research—with a renewed commitment to helping Iowa educators implement evidence-based literacy instruction with confidence and clarity.

An Update from Interim Director Speer

Advancing Evidence-Based Literacy Practices

In FY25, IRRC expanded its suite of tools and supports aimed at improving instruction, strengthening data-based decision-making and supporting policy implementation. The Literacy LIFTER and newly developed Literacy CLIFTER applications continued to gain statewide traction, offering educators and caregivers access to video models, downloadable worksheets, eLearning modules and research-based instructional guidance in both print and cursive handwriting. These tools were complemented by a systematic review of cursive instruction research, ensuring that the resources provided to Iowa educators reflect the most up-to-date and rigorous evidence.

In addition, the IRRC's caregiver data literacy work significantly broadened outreach to Iowa families. New eLearning modules, data discussion tools, customizable educator letters, and a statewide survey on parent understanding of literacy assessments support stronger communication between schools and caregivers—an essential component of effective literacy partnerships.

Strengthening Data-Based Decision-Making

To help educators identify and respond to instructional needs, IRRC launched multiple tools grounded in data-based decision-making and fidelity monitoring. These included the Tier 1.5 Calculator, which assists districts in identifying classrooms that may benefit from class-wide interventions, and the Measure FIRST tool, designed to assist instructional coaches and administrators in monitoring opportunities to respond during reading instruction. Accompanying blog posts, guidance materials, and ongoing systematic reviews on fidelity practices help

schools use these tools to support high-quality implementation of evidence-based literacy instruction.

For pre-service educators, IIRC began development of a science of reading practice assessment to support formative assessment of knowledge of evidence-based literacy instruction and assessment, ensuring Iowa's next generation of teachers enters the field with essential knowledge in evidence-based reading instruction.

Dyslexia and Statewide Supports

IIRC continued to meet its legislatively mandated responsibilities related to dyslexia. In FY25, more than 39,000 educators completed the required Dyslexia Overview module, while families across Iowa accessed free consultation, assistive technology support, and guidance on reading disabilities. The IIRC also taught Dyslexia Specialist Endorsement courses, collaborated with higher education institutions offering the endorsement and contributed to the work of the Iowa Dyslexia Board. In partnership with the Department and external experts, IIRC helped develop statewide guidance and materials, including contributions to the Iowa Dyslexia Handbook.

Direct Support to Iowa Schools and Professional Learning Communities

IIRC strengthened school partnerships and expanded its reach across Iowa. In FY25, the center established 17 district-level partnership agreements, providing no-cost professional development, fidelity monitoring support, and data analysis services. More than 2,600 educators received technical assistance on topics ranging from curriculum review and instructional alignment to secondary literacy leadership.

IIRC continued to serve as a statewide leader in literacy professional learning. The second Iowa Science of Reading Summit brought together approximately 700 participants for two days of workshops, presentations and discussion on evidence-based practices. In addition, IIRC staff presented at local, regional, national and international conferences, while thousands of educators accessed eLearning modules, blog posts, newsletters and the "Ask IIRC" video series.

Across all platforms, IIRC content reached educators, families and partners over 1 million times, with more than 469,000 website views and continued growth in newsletter readership.

Renewed Commitment to Applied Research

A strengthened research agenda is central to IIRC's mission and legislative charge. This year, IIRC initiated and advanced multiple applied research projects designed to guide practice and inform policy. These include systematic reviews on cursive instruction, fidelity monitoring, personalized reading plans nationwide and instructional alignment in MTSS. Additional research projects currently under development focus on pressing statewide needs such as caregiver data understanding, assessment literacy, and the evaluation of structured literacy implementation across diverse school contexts.

These efforts ensure that the IRRC's products, tools and technical assistance remain anchored in high-quality research and tailored to the realities Iowa educators face daily.

Looking Ahead

Iowa's progress in ensuring high-quality literacy instruction for all students depends on timely translation of research into practice and strong collaboration across the educational landscape. IRRC enters FY26 with a clear purpose: to be a trusted partner to Iowa educators, a reliable source of evidence-based guidance for families and a research-focused center capable of informing state policy on literacy instruction.

My longstanding relationships with school districts, AEAs, state agencies and education organizations across Iowa will support this effort. Together with IRRC's talented staff and the leadership of the Iowa Department of Education, the center is well-positioned to continue providing high-quality dissemination, technical assistance and research that advances literacy outcomes for all Iowa students.

IRRC appreciates the continued trust and support of the Iowa Legislature and the Iowa Department of Education, and looks forward to another year of shared progress on behalf of Iowa's children, educators, and families.