

NORTH CAROLINA SUMMER READING CAMPS

From Policy Compliance Towards Engaging
Literacy Learning



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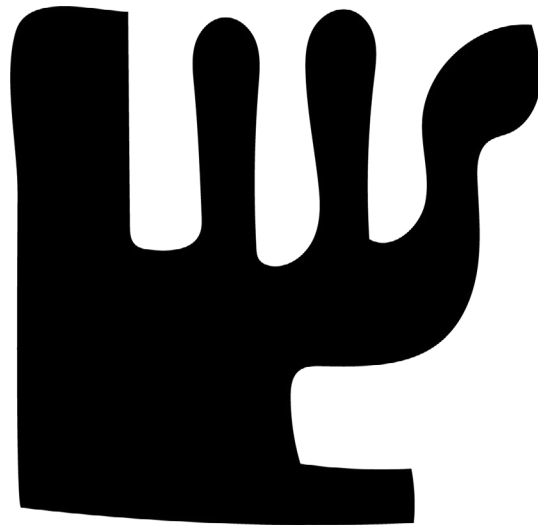
RESEARCH SAYS...

In order to achieve the critical benchmark of third grade reading proficiency, many states have passed legislation that requires the implementation of science of reading-based literacy learning programs, including during summer. In the hope to improve literacy, legislation may emphasize core academic instruction, while downplaying enrichment. However, summer learning research indicates that programs that center both academics and enrichment demonstrate stronger impact. Additionally, research suggests that attendance may suffer when students are not fully engaged, resulting in insufficient dosage needed to support summer literacy growth. ([Duke, N., 2025](#); [McCombs, J. & Augustine, C., 2021](#); [Schwartz, H., et al, 2018](#)).

For highest impact, summer literacy learning needs to include engagement and enrichment programming to boost attendance and ensure students get the dosage of instruction they need to grow as readers. In this case study, we consider North Carolina's (NC) "Reading Camps," a component of their overarching statewide legislation to improve literacy called Read to Achieve. Based on their implementation experiences, North Carolina offers considerations about the application of

literacy legislation to summer learning, including:

- Impact of narrowly interpreting state legislation policy.
- Gaps between the intended policy and actual practice.
- Opportunities for State Education Agencies to support Districts to understand and apply policy guidance to innovative practices in equity, partnership, whole-child development, and academic quality.
- Importance of data driven continuous learning to improve on the ground practice.



RESEARCH IN ACTION...

In 2012, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation requiring the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to oversee “[Read to Achieve](#),” (RtA) an initiative focused on improving reading proficiency for all third grade students, focused on regular school year literacy. This initiative is state funded and implemented at the school district level. In 2021, North Carolina passed the [Excellent Public Schools Act](#), which expanded the RtA bill, including adjusting the curriculum, and requiring elementary teachers to be trained in Lexia’s [LETRS](#) program, a science of reading-informed approach to reading instruction.

RtA provides [multiple opportunities](#) to demonstrate reading proficiency by the end of 3rd grade. If students do not show proficiency by the end of third grade, students have an option to participate in “Reading Camp.” Reading Camp is free and not mandatory; however, participation is encouraged. Reading Camp is offered to any third grade student who does not demonstrate reading proficiency, and to any second grade student who has not demonstrated growth in reading development.

According to the Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021, Reading Camps are required to:

- Offer at least 72 hours of reading instruction to yield positive reading outcomes for participants.
- Be taught by compensated, licensed teachers selected based on demonstrated student outcomes in reading proficiency or in improvement of difficulties with reading development.
- Allow volunteer mentors to read with students at times other than during the 72 hours of reading instruction.
- Be provided as outlined in the local school administrative unit’s literacy intervention plan ([2025 North Carolina Reading Camp Guide, pdf](#)).

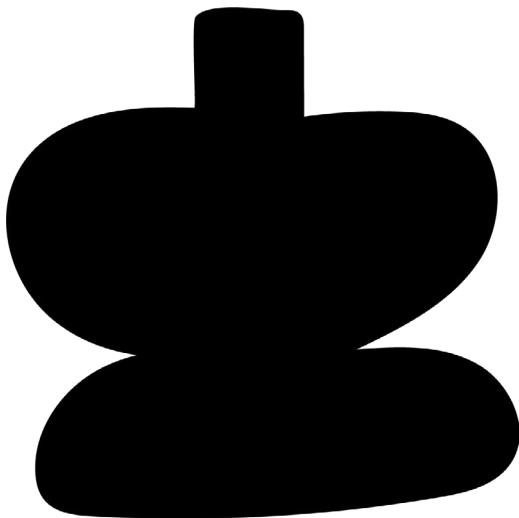
In 2018, North Carolina State University published the first part of their study of the initiative, which found that Read to Achieve was not correlated with positive increases in reading: test scores either stayed mostly flat (4th grade) or slightly declined (3rd grade) since the start of RtA ([Weiss, Stallings, & Porter, 2018](#)). The study also compared test results for students who participated in Reading Camp to those who were eligible but did not attend. Their analysis found that participation in Reading Camp did not make a significant difference in test scores. One hypothesis about why was related to the voluntary nature of the program, as many invited students did not attend, and were therefore “not exposed to one of its major interventions.”

In October 2024, in a report to the North Carolina General Assembly, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) shared reading scores, following the changes related to implementation of the 2021 Excellence in Public Schools Act. (As described above, these changes included adjusting the curriculum, and requiring elementary teachers to be trained in Lexia’s [LETRS](#) program, a science of reading-informed approach to reading instruction.)

Students at or above benchmark increased from 2020-21 to 2023-24:

- Grade 1: 39% to 70%
- Grade 2: 43% to 65%
- Grade 3 overall proficiency: 44% to 49%

~20% of all third-grade students in NC were retained or placed in transitional classes because they did not demonstrate reading proficiency.



For Reading Camps in 2023-24, there was also some improvement:

- Grade 2: 27% of eligible students attended, with 13% achieving proficiency after camp.
- Grade 3: 36% eligible students attended with 22% reaching proficiency after camp.
- However, the report noted that attendance at Reading Camp decreased. Of those eligible, 7.9% of first graders and 27% of second graders participated. While 21.4% of overall third graders were eligible statewide, only 36.3% of those students attended.

Amy Rhyne, Senior Director of the Office of Early Learning at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, [noted](#) that by the end of 2024, half of the districts in the state had completed the second volume of the Lexia LETRS training, which “enabled teachers to intervene more quickly to help students.” Regarding Reading Camps, Rhyne noted that families had to choose whether to enroll their child and added, “as it’s more engaging and it’s more innovative, you also hopefully will see that change as we continue moving forward there, too.”

IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES

In its 2018 study, NC State University suggested that the results may reflect gaps between the RtA / Reading Camp policy and implementation. Reading Camp assumes sufficient numbers of high-quality, trained reading teachers willing to work during the summer, which proved to not be the implementation reality as training, capacity, and teacher interest varied across the state.

In fall 2023, coaches from the [District Summer Learning Network \(DSLNL\)](#), which supports districts and state agencies to design and plan sustainable, high-quality summer learning programs, supported the Department of Public Instruction and individual school districts to reflect on summer 2023 and plan improvements for summer 2024. These reflections provided evidence that districts' strict adherence to what they perceived as "reading only" requirements may have contributed to families' disinterest in enrollment, and students' disengagement and low attendance.

District leaders reported common challenges, including:

- Concern about state guidelines as mandate versus guidance. Most district leaders reported interpreting the legislation as a narrow view of "reading only," describing concern to veer from the regulations. District leaders expressed confusion about what elements of the program allowed for innovation.
- Poor student attendance: both for enrollment of eligible students and attendance for those who had enrolled.
- Low student engagement: educators reported that students were disengaged and described summer learning as being "just like regular school," and "boring."
- District leaders reported that families described the messaging as punitive and not inviting: "families felt that kids did not want to get sent back to do something that they had not been good at all year." Many parents instead opted into local summer camps.
- Challenge in recruiting and staffing highly qualified literacy teachers: several districts were unable to hire a sufficient number of educators trained in the reading instruction.

Out of this planning, DSLNL and DPI hosted a convening in Spring 2024 to support districts in the planning of the 2024 Summer Reading Camps. This was an opportunity to create alignment across the state and to organize districts to learn from and with each other. In an attempt to shift the culture from compliance toward collaboration, they provided clear guidance about the legislation and also gave districts the opportunity to share innovations, including models for academic rigor infused with enrichment and engagement. The response to the convening was positive, and North Carolina's DPI began to understand the important role they played in supporting districts in summer planning.

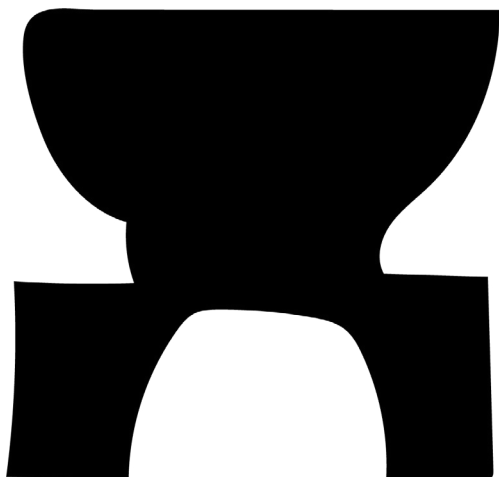
STATE–LEVEL PLANNING IMPROVEMENTS FOR SUMMER 2025

DPI reassessed its role in supporting districts after realizing the unintended consequences of a strict interpretation of reading legislation. In preparation for Summer 2025, the DPI summer learning design team concentrated on communicating the vision in a way that the districts could embrace, including attending to adult learning and change management. They also created a structure of people to support the work, which included a literacy specialist for each district and a team of consultants supporting those specialists. The DSLN consultant supporting this group helped them adapt the [DSLN roadmap](#), a year long planning tool focused on building and sustaining evidence-based, high-quality summer learning experiences, so that DPI could better support districts to prepare for summer.

DPI also created an improved 2025 guide called "[NC Reading Camps Reimagined!](#)"

The refined guide reflects and aligns with North Carolina legislation and policy and encourages districts to center innovation through equity, partnership, whole-child development, and academic quality. For example: the tool now includes a section called "Reading Camp Best Practices and High-Quality (HQ) Standards" that includes design recommendations, research-based suggestions, and resources for planning, implementing, and continuous improvement. Additionally, the literacy specialists were now prepared and focused on the changes needed in summer camps and were able to support districts in implementing those changes.

The state also focused on improved communications, including holding statewide video conferences using the new guidance tools, as well as revising the invitation letter to parents to feel more "camp-like."



DISTRICT–LEVEL PLANNING IMPROVEMENTS FOR SUMMER 2025

In their year long planning process with their DSLN coaches, school districts focused on key goals for 2025, including:

Improving Consistent Attendance:

- Collaborating with CBO partners: alignment around the shared action of encouraging parents and students to attend summer reading camps.
- Revising communications to be more inviting to families and students.

Encouraging Persistent Engagement:

- Focusing on instructional engagement strategies and active reading, including reflecting on thinking, asking probing questions, working with partners, and small groups.
- Considering shifts to schedules in order to infuse enrichment into reading instruction.
- Designing Reading Camp around themes that allow literacy to be infused, and identifying literature and materials to support enrichment. Districts hoped

this would provide opportunities for teachers to personalize and individualize instruction.

- Working with partners, e.g. library, science center, to plan collaboratively.

Demonstrating Literacy Gains:

- Used the [DSLN Academic Quality Tool](#) to focus on acceleration over remediation.
- Specified priority literacy skills: For example, one district chose fluency and vocabulary as priority skills based on student data identified in DIBELS assessments. They hoped to use their limited summer session to focus more deeply on targeted instruction.

Districts have not provided reflection or data about Summer 2025 Reading Camps. However, during the Spring 2025 planning period, district leaders and DSLN coaches reflected that they were eager for the opportunity to increase joy and academic success during the summer.

The suggested citation for this case study is:

Dr. Kimberley Ednie, Ed.L.D. (2025, September). *North Carolina Summer Reading Camps: Moving From Policy Compliance Towards Engaging Literacy Learning*.

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