



A Chief Academic Officer's Guide to Improving Third- Grade Literacy: 32 TIPS



Third-Grade Literacy: The Cornerstone of Learning

Reading well by third grade is critical to a student’s future success. Research shows that students who aren’t proficient in reading by the end of third grade are [four times more likely to drop out of high school](#) than proficient readers. Why? **Third grade is the final year that students are learning to read, rather than reading to learn.**

However, to ensure that every student is reading at grade level by third grade, it’s not enough for your district to develop a singular program or hire a literacy coach. System improvement requires a district-wide approach and an expansive “toolbox” of strategies to build educator capacity, effectively use data, and deliver literacy supports.

Based on our work helping districts improve third-grade literacy, we put together a list of 32 ideas and action steps that you can use for inspiration as you build or evaluate your district’s literacy plan.



Have feedback on this guide? Ideas you'd like to add? Please email Jenna at jbuckle@panoramaed.com.

- 1** Establish and communicate specific goals around literacy, such as the percent of students reaching reading proficiency by grade three. Having clear goals makes the work meaningful for educators on the ground.
- 2** Develop or identify a reading curriculum that is aligned to rigorous and clearly defined standards, and that takes a multifaceted approach to literacy that includes phonics and comprehension.
- 3** Don't just set goals and leave schools to execute on their own. Provide them with systems, tools, ongoing support, and check-in points. In other words, invest resources and time behind the literacy goals that you say are important.
- 4** Build cross-functional momentum and collective ownership around your goals through a District Literacy Leadership team. Too often, literacy work is siloed. A team of school and district leaders, teachers, and community partners can convene annually or bi-annually to reflect on progress and revise or adjust action steps as necessary.
- 5** On a similar note, create Literacy Leadership Teams at the campus level that focus on literacy plan implementation. These teams can meet monthly to assess campus needs, create goals, and monitor progress toward literacy goals.
- 6** Publicize your district's literacy goals and action plan on your website, including relevant resources and information for families and teachers.

- 7** Don't lose sight of cultivating an engaging reading environment. A district-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) can enable readers to have more time on text and lead to improved classroom engagement.
- 8** Leverage literacy coaching across the district to ensure that all educators understand and can apply the components of literacy instruction. Literacy coaches can be made available for individual and group teacher coaching, modeling of reading instruction and interventions, and ongoing collaboration.
- 9** Invest in training that builds educator capacity around the science of reading. Do all educators understand the fundamentals of how our brains learn to read—and how to apply these principles to instruction?
- 10** Focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) and school climate to create a positive and safe environment where students feel ready to read and learn. SEL can also develop readers by teaching them critical learning strategies for collaborating with their peers around reading.

“ We embedded SEL into everything we did around literacy. We had phrases that we'd use with students constantly around growth mindset. We also designated students as 'heroes' when they demonstrated SEL values and they would wear capes for the day.”



– **Emily Maciá**, former Principal at Achievement First (NY) and Panorama Client Success Manager

- 11** Require universal screening for students in grades K-3 to support early identification of struggling readers.
- 12** Provide schools with an approved list of literacy assessments they can choose from in order to screen students. Train schools on implementing the assessments to ensure they are gathering high-quality data.
- 13** Develop a set of student literacy “statuses” that every school uses within your [Multi-Tiered System of Supports \(MTSS\)](#) or Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. For example, your nomenclature for readers might be “Behind,” “At Risk,” “Progressing,” and “On Track.”
- 14** Help schools create a culture of literacy. Provide creative ideas for Tier 1, universal supports that all students receive. Examples include: sending weekly reading progress updates; visually tracking students’ reading levels in the classroom; hosting book fairs; having books of the month; holding reading challenges.
- 15** Remember the shape of the MTSS pyramid. If 70 to 80 percent of students are reading below grade level, this does not call for Tier 2 intervention. Your schools should instead focus on strengthening Tier 1 supports that benefit all students.
- 16** Establish a set of recommended, evidence-based Tier 2 literacy interventions, such as small group pull-outs for targeted reading instruction. Ensure that all staff are trained to implement Tier 2 interventions with fidelity.

17 Provide schools with recommended Tier 3 interventions for students persistently at risk, such as intensive, individualized 90-minute daily reading instruction.

18 Require data-driven, weekly progress monitoring for students in grades K-3 who are at risk in reading and receiving intervention. These checkpoints are opportunities to measure growth towards the goal and whether or not interventions are meeting student needs.

19 Have schools create cross-functional PLCs or Student Support Teams (SSTs) that meet on a regular basis to monitor student progress and collaborate on interventions. For example, Utah’s [Ogden School District](#) uses Child Assistance Teams (ChATs) at every school to mobilize around at-risk students and deliver Tier 2 supports.

“What if a teacher, speech language pathologist, and special education director all knew what worked well for a particular student, and collaborated so that the student could unlock the meaning of a nonfiction text? If that team doesn’t have access to the same data or interact with each other, this isn’t possible.”



– **Gavin Laughlin**, former Content Lead at KIPP Massachusetts and Panorama Outreach Specialist

20 Every student deserves a champion. Encourage schools to assign an adult champion for every student receiving reading services. Improving student belonging and [teacher-student relationships](#) can be powerful levers for academic achievement.

21 Centralize literacy interventions and progress monitoring by using an [MTSS data platform](#) like Panorama Student Success. This can save time for staff and streamline data protocols so that educators can focus on supporting students instead of compiling data. It can also strengthen cross-team collaboration and accountability toward literacy goals.

“Third-grade literacy is a priority in the state of Iowa and in our school. We're so thankful that Panorama Student Success was rolled out across the state, as we have seen incredible growth in our students hitting literacy benchmarks. Teachers are assigning interventions, tracking progress made, and using the data to determine next steps with students. We can easily see the effectiveness of interventions. It has been a game changer.”



– **Heather Fuger**, *Principal, Central Lee Elementary School (IA)*

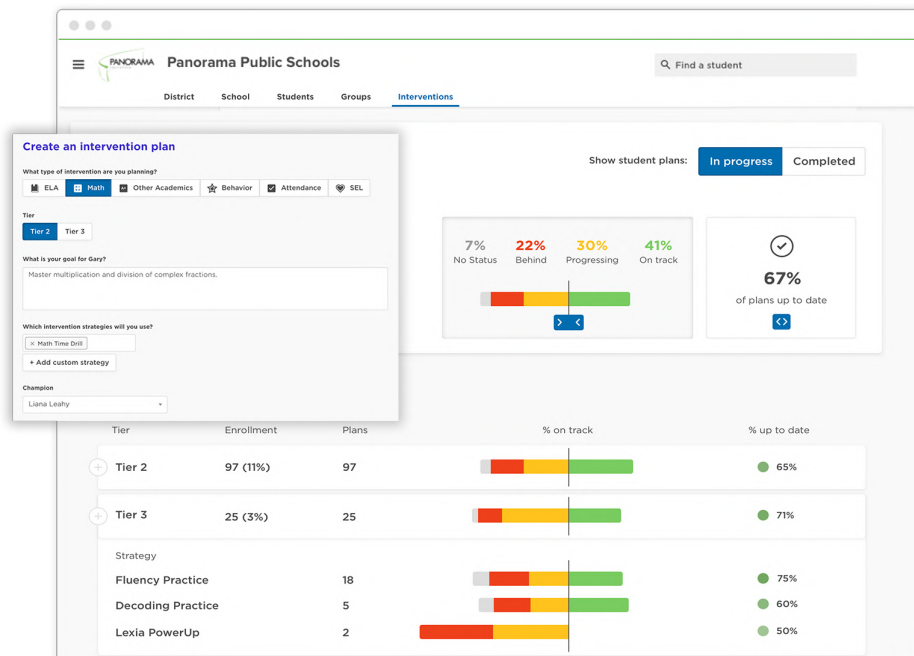
22 Don't just look at literacy data in isolation. Empower schools with data to explore if there is more to a student's story than a reading problem. Attendance, behavior, social-emotional learning, and other data can build a complete narrative and help educators generate solutions that account for root causes.

23 Interact with your district's student literacy data at the demographic level to understand achievement gaps by grade level, race-ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. Be sure to equip school leaders with tools and data to conduct these analyses in their own building. Reviewing literacy data through an equity lens can help schools develop interventions that target gaps.

- 24** Evaluate the effectiveness of each intervention strategy to see what is and isn't working across the district and on specific campuses. What interventions are driving the most growth for students? Share out those insights to drive continuous improvement.
- 25** Make sure that schools are looking at students who are reading at benchmark, but have more potential and may be falling under the radar. What supports are in place so that these students don't fall behind as texts become more challenging and as reading becomes a primary source of learning?
- 26** Establish firm guidelines for schools regarding communication with parents and families about literacy intervention. What should the communications look like? What data should be included? How often should schools update families on the student's progress?
- 27** Provide schools with a list of ideas, strategies, and resources for equipping parents to support literacy improvement at home. For example: providing parents with materials to practice reading skills with their child; making YouTube videos to demonstrate phonic sounds; sending home laminated bookmarks with question prompts for parents to use with their child.
- 28** Administer [family feedback surveys](#) to better understand the confidence level of families when it comes to supporting learning at home. The data can help you identify where families may need more support. For example, after Wake County Public Schools (NC) collected survey feedback from families, one elementary school took action on the data by [hosting a literacy-themed family teacher night](#).

- 29** Create a district program that provides English classes for parents for whom English is a second language. Encourage schools to provide audio resources and supporting texts for parents who cannot yet read in English, so that parents can still support reading at home.
- 30** Share research and best practices to help schools effectively work with English language learning students. For example, [current research](#) shows that supporting a student's first language can help the student learn to read in English. In addition, educators should encourage family members to read with students in their native language at home.
- 31** Ensure that schools are making reading accessible and engaging to students from diverse backgrounds. Are students exposed to stories and texts about people who look like them and/or come from similar backgrounds as they do?
- 32** Last but not least: Don't forget to celebrate and highlight literacy successes throughout the district. This can keep your schools motivated, learning from each other, and working hard to hit goals.

Ensure that every student is reading at grade level with Panorama's leading MTSS/RTI platform.



[Panorama Student Success](#) helps districts systematize their MTSS/RTI programs. With Panorama, educators can monitor student performance in real time across literacy, math, core academics, attendance, and behavior. We make it easy to coordinate action, track interventions, and progress monitor in one place so educators can focus on what they do best: supporting students.

Today, 900 school systems serving 10 million students trust Panorama, including the New York City Department of Education, Dallas Independent School District, and San Francisco Unified School District.

Learn about bringing Panorama to your school district:
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