

Emerson Early Literacy Challenge



I. Overview

Background:

Literacy is a gateway to opportunity and economic success, while illiteracy contributes to major societal challenges such as higher crime, incarceration rates and increased poverty. In St. Louis, as in many parts of the U.S., several student groups particularly Black students, students with dyslexia, those with IEPs, and English Language Learners are performing below their potential in reading.

In response to these disparities, the Right to Read movement, spurred by the NAACP, is championing literacy equity nationwide. In 2022, Missouri passed Senate Bill 681 mandating evidence-based reading instruction and has prompted the Missouri Read, Lead, Exceed initiative, a \$60 million investment in literacy, including teacher training on the Science of Reading. Locally, the St. Louis and St. Louis County NAACP chapters launched a reading campaign, further emphasizing the community's commitment to improving reading proficiency.

Building on this momentum, The Opportunity Trust aims to eliminate third-grade reading proficiency gaps in St. Louis by 2030. In partnership with Emerson, The Opportunity Trust is launching the Emerson Early Literacy Challenge, an initiative designed to accelerate literacy outcomes and establish proof points for success.

Program Overview:

The Emerson Early Literacy Challenge seeks to engage 3-4 Local Education Agencies (LEAs) from St. Louis City and County in a two-year, immersive learning experience. This initiative will connect LEA teams with the latest research and best practices in literacy instruction, aiming to bridge the gap between Science of Reading research and practical implementation.

Participation Details:

Selected LEA teams will consist of 5-10 members, including a Core Team (e.g., principal, educators, literacy leader) and a Broader Team (e.g., parents, school board members). All participants will be invited to a kickoff event and engagement opportunities throughout the year. The Core Team will engage in four comprehensive literacy training events facilitated by Instruction Partners. LEA teams will then collaborate with literacy experts to develop and pilot literacy plans for the 2024-2025 school year. Learning events will offer exposure to literacy experts, successful models, and high-quality customized consulting support through best-in-class instructional capacity builders.

September 26th, 2024
Application Closes

Funding Support:

Each selected LEA will immediately receive a \$20,000 planning grant for participating in the learning events between October 2024 and January 2025. For example, an LEA may use part of the grant to fund substitute teachers while educators participate in learning events. Upon successful co-creation and piloting of their literacy plans in Spring 2025, LEAs will be eligible for up to \$250,000 in implementation funding to fully execute their Literacy Plan in the 2025–2026 school year. Additionally, successful LEAs may be recognized in media and industry publications.

Governance:

The Emerson Early Literacy Challenge will be guided by a Steering Committee that includes local literacy experts and education leaders representing parent groups, higher education, the Missouri Department of Education, community-based organizations, and philanthropy. The Steering Committee will provide strategic direction, offer expertise, and help build community partnerships.

Eligibility and Application:

LEAs in St. Louis City and County with a strong track record of data-driven continuous improvement and a commitment to rapidly improving early—defined as K–3— literacy outcomes are encouraged to apply. To express interest in the Emerson Early Literacy Challenge, please submit your application by September 20th. Application details are provided below.

II. Guiding Principles

The Emerson Early Literacy Challenge is driven by the following guiding principles:

Literacy is a human and civil right:

All children are capable of reading proficiently by 3rd grade and doing so is foundational to success in school and in life.

Proficiency is possible with the right conditions and approaches:

Schools and school systems applying the Science of Reading and relevant learning methodologies that meet students' diverse needs are creating classrooms where the majority of students irrespective of background attain grade level proficiency.

Collaboration is essential to accelerate improvement:

The best solutions for St. Louis schools will be developed by education leaders who share their expertise, learn from promising practices, and engage parents and community as partners.

Proof points will catalyze a greater collective sense of possibility:

Having local success stories is essential to sustaining the changes required at the school, system, and state level to ensure all children in our public schools can read proficiently by 3rd grade.

III. Timeline

Application Timeline

September 12th
Application
Opens

September 16th
3:30-4:30 CT
Info Session video of info
session found online at
emersonliteracychallenge.org

September 26th
11:59pm CT
Application
Closes

September 30th, - October 4th
Capacity
Interviews

**October
10th**
Decisions
Announced

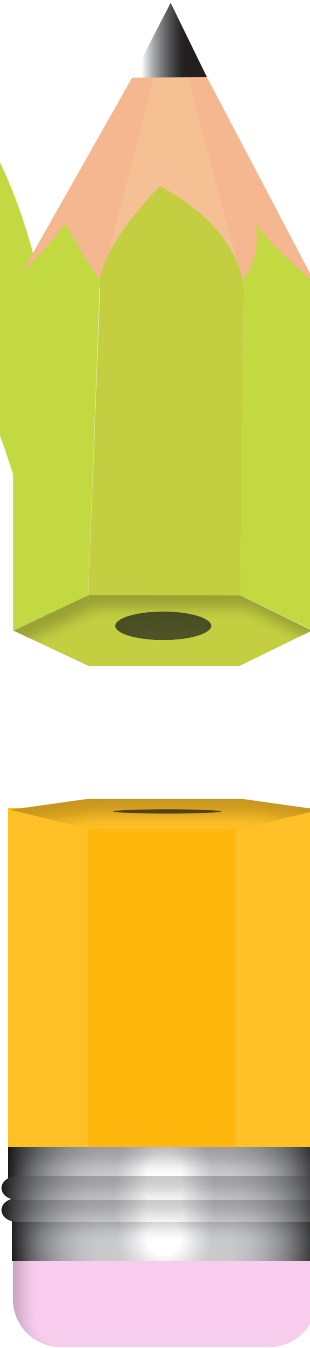
Program Timeline

October 2024
Emerson Early Literacy
Challenge Steering
Committee reviews
and selects LEAs from
application pool

November 2024 - January 2025
Learning events, including a 2-day
site visit to an effective learning
site, and coaching kickoff for LEAs,
continuing into 2025

February - March 2025
LEAs draft and iterate
Literacy Plans alongside
literacy experts

SY 2025-2026
LEAs launch Literacy
Plans



IV. Application Criteria

Representative LEA Team:

We seek diverse, motivated, mission-driven teams composed of change-agents who demonstrate the ability to execute and deliver impact for students and communities. Successful LEAs will have teams that represent the perspectives of parents, teachers, building leaders, central office decision-makers, instructional coaches, and their school system governing board. Tactically, LEA Teams are expected to have between 5-10 team members, and should consist of a Core Team (e.g., principal, educators, head of literacy) and Broader Team (e.g., superintendent, CAO, parents, school board, other stakeholders)

Knowledge & Implementation of Best Practices:

We seek LEAs with a baseline knowledge and understanding of the “The Science of Reading,” who are looking to take their literacy journeys to the next level. We are looking for LEAs that have successfully implemented innovative practices, and have fostered a culture of continuous learning. Successful LEAs will have already begun their literacy journeys, and are utilizing green-rated curriculum (according to EdReports), phonics, etc.

Readiness for Change:

We seek LEAs that are fully prepared to embrace change and make significant shifts to how early literacy is being implemented in classrooms. Successful applicants will display a growth mindset, a willingness to innovate, openness to feedback, and willingness to make mid-course corrections as the pilot and implementation unfolds.

Data Driven Culture:

We seek LEAs with a track record of monitoring results to track student achievement and practicing data-driven decision-making. Successful LEAs will have clear examples of using data to drive continuous improvement.

For more information, visit EmersonLiteracyChallenge.org or contact Jesse Dixon at jdixon@theopportunitytrust.org