

Emerson Early Literacy Challenge Cohort Two Application

Due date: September 5, 2025

I. Overview

Background:

Literacy is a gateway to opportunity and economic success, while illiteracy contributes to major societal challenges such as higher 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.

Program Overview:

Building on this momentum, The Opportunity Trust aims to eliminate third-grade reading proficiency gaps in St. Louis by 2030. In 2024, in partnership with Emerson, The Opportunity Trust launched the Emerson Early Literacy Challenge, an initiative designed to accelerate literacy outcomes and establish proof points for success. The Opportunity Trust is identifying participants for the second cohort, which will be launched for the 2025–2026 school year.

Each cohort of the Emerson Early Literacy Challenge consists of four Local Education Agencies (LEAs) from St. Louis City and County. The LEAs participate in a year-long, immersive learning experience facilitated by Attuned Education Partners, national experts in closing early literacy gaps. During four full-day cohort learning sessions, these early literacy capacity builders connect LEAs with the latest research and best practices in literacy instruction, aiming to bridge the gap between Science of Reading research and practical implementation. Early literacy capacity builders guide LEAs in developing comprehensive, science-based literacy plans and preparing to implement them. LEAs with approved literacy plans will receive up to \$200,000 in implementation funding.

Participation Details:

Selected LEA teams will consist of a four-five person Core Team, which should include the principal / head of school, the district literacy leader, at least two educators, and another member of your choosing. The Core Team will:

- Engage in three to four full-day comprehensive literacy training events facilitated by nationally recognized literacy experts. These learning events will offer exposure to literacy experts, successful models, and high-quality customized consulting support through best-in-class instructional capacity builders. Each LEA will be asked to host one of these cohort learning sessions at their participating school.
- Attend a learning site visit to Richmond, Virginia to learn from a district that has significantly improved student learning outcomes.
- Collaborate with literacy experts through 1:1 coaching to develop and pilot literacy plans for the 2026-2027 school year.
- Have the opportunity to be recognized in media and industry publications.

Funding Support:

Upon acceptance into the cohort, LEAs will immediately receive a **\$5,000 planning grant** to be used for program related expenses (e.g., substitute teachers). Upon approval of their literacy plans in Spring 2026, LEAs will be eligible for **up to \$200,000 in implementation funding** to fully execute their Literacy Plan in the 2026-2027 school year. **To be eligible for funding, the entire Core Team must attend all cohort learning sessions.**

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 5. 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	
Information Sessions	August 14 @11am CT via Zoom (link here) August 22 @11:15am CT via Zoom (link here)
Application Closes	September 5, 2025
Invitations to Interview	September 9–10, 2025
Capacity Interviews	September 11–16, 2025
Decisions Announced	September 19, 2025

Program Timeline	
90-Minute Virtual Kickoff	October 1, 2025, 10-11:30am CT
Full-Day, In Person Cohort Learning Session #1	October 24, 2025
Full-Day, In Person Cohort Learning Session #2	November 18, 2025
Overnight Learning Site Visit to Richmond, Virginia	January 2026, Exact dates to be confirmed in Fall 2025
Full-Day, In Person Cohort Learning Session #3	February 5, 2026
Literacy Plans Finalized	End of February 2026
Full-Day, In Person Cohort Learning Session #4	March 31, 2026

IV. Application Criteria

Applications will be evaluated along four dimensions:

- 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 teachers, building leaders, central office decision-makers, and instructional coaches.
- Knowledge & Implementation of Best Practices:** We seek LEAs with a baseline knowledge and understanding of “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.

Application Process:

Submit the following application form [on our website](#) by September 5 at 11:59 pm CT. Select LEAs will be invited to a 90-minute capacity interview between September 11-16.

V. Emerson Early Literacy Challenge Application

Please complete the following application questions as thoroughly as possible, and [submit via our website](#) by September 5th at 11:59 pm CT. There will be two information sessions to answer questions: August 14 @11am CT via Zoom ([link here](#)) and August 22 @11:15am CT via Zoom ([link here](#)). Please reach out to Jonathan Caldera at jcaldera@theopportunitytrust.org with other questions.

1. LEA OVERVIEW

- LEA Name _____
- Address _____
- Primary contact for application _____
- Target school(s) information
 - 2024-2025 Grade levels served _____
 - 2024-2025 Enrollment _____
 - Demographic breakdown _____
 - ELL Percentage _____
 - 2024-2025 Attendance rate _____
 - 2024-2025 MAP performance _____

2. Literacy Artifacts

To get a more detailed picture of your LEA's context and current state of literacy instruction, assessment practices, and implementation of the science of reading, we ask that you please upload the following artifacts, where available:

- Benchmark assessment results from 2024-2025 (e.g., iReady, NWEA)
- Chart or description of adopted early literacy core and intervention curricular materials for K-3, including year adopted
- Literacy block schedule
- Chart or description of literacy instructional and leadership roles
- Sample literacy professional development, PLC agendas, facilitation plans, and/or materials
- Sample lesson and unit internalization protocols
- Foundational skills screener and progress monitoring tools
- Sample observation tool and feedback

3. LEA TEAM MEMBERS

The 4-5 person Core Team should include a "Head of Literacy," Principal/Head of School, two Educators, and an optional fifth member of your choosing. Core Team members are expected to attend all scheduled programming detailed in the program timeline.

CORE TEAM

1: Required: LEA "Head of Literacy"

- Full Name
- Title
- Tenure at LEA
- Email
- Phone Number
- Relevant literacy experience (e.g., trainings, certifications)
- 2-3 sentences describing why they are being included

Commitment to attend all scheduled programming defined in the timeline

2: Required: Principal/Head of School

- Full Name
- Title
- Tenure at LEA
- Email
- Phone Number
- Commitment to attend all scheduled programming defined in the timeline

3: Required: Educator 1

- Full Name
- Title, including grades and subjects for participating Educator(s)
- Tenure at LEA
- Email
- Phone Number
- 2-3 sentences describing why they are being included
- Commitment to attend all scheduled programming defined in the timeline

4: Required: Educator 2

- Full Name
- Title, including grades and subjects for participating Educator(s)
- Tenure at LEA
- Email
- Phone Number
- 2-3 sentences describing why they are being included
- Commitment to attend all scheduled programming defined in the timeline

5: Optional - Other Core Team member (e.g., Superintendent, additional educator, instructional coach)

- Full Name
- Title, including grades and subjects for participating Educator(s)
- Tenure at LEA
- Email
- Phone Number
- 2-3 sentences describing why they are being included

4. QUESTIONS (Maximum 1,000 words per question)

1. **Curriculum:** What early literacy curriculum materials are currently used at your LEA for Kindergarten–3rd grade? How long have they been in use? What curriculum was used previously?
2. **Science of Reading:** What role, if any, does the Science of Reading play in your curriculum?
3. **Literacy Initiatives:** What steps has your LEA taken in the last three years to early literacy? What has been most/least successful?
4. **Professional Development:** What types of Science of Reading professional development has been provided for leaders / educators to date? How many educators have received it? .
5. **Data Tools:** What tools, systems and dashboards does your LEA use to make data collection, analysis and reporting easy and efficient? How frequently are you reviewing this data? Is someone responsible for scoring, analyzing and visualizing data for your LEA?
6. **Data-Driven:** How has your LEA used data to address student challenges? How is data being used to improve student outcomes, and ensure decision-making is data-driven?
7. **Change Experience:** Please give an example of when your LEA set an ambitious goal around student learning and had to organize differently to meet that goal. What steps did you take? What data did you use to measure the results?
8. **Essential Supports:** Beyond curriculum and instruction, successful literacy programs are supported by healthy school learning climates, parent involvement, and community ties. What support systems does your LEA have in place to support this literacy journey? How might you involve parents and School Board members in the Emerson Early Literacy Challenge journey, should your LEA be selected?
9. **Motivation:** Why is your LEA a great applicant for the Emerson Early Literacy Challenge? What gives you confidence you can take your LEA’s learning to the next level through cohort learning? Is there anything else the reviewers should be aware of?

5. Participation Commitments

Attendance Commitment: Grant funding is dependent on the Core Team attending all scheduled programming. Does your LEA commit to prioritizing attendance at all programming, should your LEA be selected? (Yes/No)

Hosting Commitment: We plan to host one cohort learning session at each participating LEA. The Opportunity Trust will cover all supply and catering costs. Does your LEA commit to hosting one full-day cohort learning session at your participating school, should your LEA be selected? The group size would be ~25. (Yes/No)

6. Interview Availability & Logistics

Interview Availability: Should your LEA be chosen to advance to the interview round, please select *at least three windows* when your LEA is available for an interview. These 90 minute slots will be held at your target school, and will include a classroom visit and an interview component. We hope to meet several members of your Core Team during this time.

- Thursday 9/11 9-10:30am CT
- Thursday 9/11 1:30-3:00pm CT
- Friday 9/12 9:30-11am CT
- Monday 9/15 9-10:30am CT
- Monday 9/15 11:30am-1pm CT
- Tuesday 9/16 9:30-11am CT

Interview Logistics: Please provide the below details regarding interview logistics, should your LEA be invited to the interview round.

- School Name:
- School Address:
- Parking / Entry Instructions:
- Contact Name:
- Contact Phone Number:

Thank you for taking the time to apply to participate in the Emerson Early Literacy Challenge. We will share first round decisions and interview assignments, if applicable, by EOD on September 10th. Please hold the selected interview slots in the meantime.