



Open Letter to WNY School Superintendents

Dear Superintendents,

We want to thank you, the school leaders in Western New York, for your efforts to support students over the years, especially during and after the pandemic when school closures had a significant impact on the mental health and educational progress of many children. Without your efforts to safely reopen schools in Western New York, and to help address the learning loss caused by remote instruction, the effects would have been far greater. All education stakeholders are forever grateful for everything that you have done to support students in Western New York.

As we all work to help address the learning loss caused by the pandemic, one area still stands out – literacy. Literacy is the foundation for all future learning. Studies show that students who are unable to read proficiently by fourth grade are far more likely to drop out of school and have behavioral problems.

Unfortunately, reading proficiency scores from NAEP and NYSED remain troubling. According to NAEP, around 2/3 of students are not reading proficiently. Using data from NYSED, less than 1/2 of students in New York are reading proficiently. Some school districts in Western New York scored a little higher and some a little lower. Nonetheless, we believe that we can all agree that there is significant room for improvement across all school districts in Western New York.

To be clear, the low reading proficiency scores should be viewed as a call to action, not a call to criticize the efforts of school districts. There is absolutely no doubt that the relatively low literacy rates are not a reflection of the intentions or efforts of educators, who have worked tirelessly to support students throughout the region before, during, and after the pandemic.

There are many reasons for the relatively low literacy rates; indeed, it is a complex problem. **However, one important factor that can be addressed is the way in which reading instruction is provided in area schools.** Most school districts continue to use “balanced” literacy programs which are not aligned with the well-established science on how children learn to read.



Whereas structured literacy programs that are implemented properly have the ability to reach at least 95% of students, **“balanced” literacy programs and curricula have been shown to not work well for students with dyslexia, struggling readers, and ESL students.** This partly explains why reading proficiency scores have remained below 50-70%, even in the highest-achieving districts, for a long period of time.

Based on the research from the National Reading Panel, 30 states have now enacted legislation that either mandates evidence-based reading instruction or provides funds to support teacher training in the science of reading. Many school districts in New York State, including New York City and local districts such as Akron, Buffalo, Jamestown, and Medina have started to provide evidence-based reading instruction and others have implemented pilot programs. Things are beginning to move in the right direction, and we applaud the efforts of the superintendents in these districts for their leadership on this important issue.

However, one impediment to changing the way in which reading is taught in schools is the fact that very few administrators and teachers have been trained in the science of reading. In many areas, this has prevented stakeholders from coming to the table to discuss ways in which different organizations can work together to improve reading instruction and literacy rates.

We see this as an important opportunity in Western New York, particularly now that there is growing national attention on providing evidence-based reading instruction. We recently hosted the first WNY Science of Reading Conference, as part of the WNY Literacy Initiative, and have had a tremendous response from educators throughout the area. We plan on hosting additional events given the growing interest.

However, as school leaders in the region, we need your support as well. To help improve literacy rates in Western New York, the WNY Education Alliance is calling on local superintendents to support the following initiatives:

1. **Join the WNY Literacy Committee** – The WNY Education Alliance invites area superintendents to join and participate in the WNY Literacy Committee. This committee will be comprised of various education stakeholders, including teachers, parents, community groups, school board members, university



- professors, education non-profits, and literacy experts. The committee will work together on initiatives that aim to improve literacy rates in Western New York. Your participation on this committee is extremely important to the community.
2. **Provide Professional Development** – We urge all superintendents to provide teachers, curriculum directors, and administrators with high-quality professional development to learn more about how children learn to read. Teachers are eager to learn more about the science of reading and we believe that this training needs to be provided as soon as possible to help children. This was an important takeaway from our conference.
 3. **Improve Reading Curriculum** – Many schools in Western New York continue to use “balanced” literacy curricula that are not supported by the scientific research and are ranked poorly by third-party curriculum evaluators. We urge superintendents to conduct a thorough review of reading instruction programs and move toward using evidence-based, content-rich, structured literacy curricula that support all students. To be clear, we are not advocating for any specific curriculum; we simply believe that the reading curricula that are used in schools should be aligned with the science of reading and supported by data. Lastly, we believe that schools should provide more transparency into the reading curricula that are used in their schools, the data and third-party reports that were used to evaluate the curricula, and any data used to assess reading proficiency and intervention in schools.

We thank you for all of your efforts and we look forward to working with superintendents and all education stakeholders on this critical issue.

Sincerely,
Tarja Parssinen
Founder WNY Education Alliance