



Building the Bridge to Comprehension

Why Fluency Is a Tier 1 Imperative for District Leaders

By Lynne Kulich, Ph.D.



District leaders across the country are strengthening Tier 1 literacy systems by focusing on fluency as the bridge between decoding and comprehension. This article explains why fluency instruction is essential for sustainable MTSS frameworks and improved reading outcomes.

Why strong fluency instruction matters for K–12 leaders

For district and school leaders, reading fluency is often viewed as a classroom-level skill – important, but secondary to curriculum adoption, assessment systems, or intervention design. In reality, fluency functions as a **system-level lever within Tier 1 instruction**. When fluency is weak or inconsistently taught, comprehension suffers, benchmark data flags large numbers of students as “at risk,” and intervention pipelines expand rapidly.

This is not simply an instructional concern – it is an **MTSS sustainability issue**. Strong fluency instruction strengthens the bridge between decoding and comprehension, reducing downstream remediation and ensuring that Tier 1 instruction meets the needs of the majority of students.

This paper examines why fluency deserves renewed attention from district leaders and how evidence-based fluency practices support prevention-focused literacy systems.

Foundational reading models: What leaders need to know

Decades of research confirm that learning to read is not intuitive. It requires explicit, systematic instruction in foundational skills, beginning with phonemic awareness and phonics. These foundational skills allow students to map sounds (phonemes) to letters (graphemes), enabling accurate word recognition and, ultimately, comprehension.

The National Reading Panel identified five essential components of effective reading instruction: **phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension**. While many districts have made significant investments in phonics and early decoding – often under the umbrella of Science of Reading initiatives – **fluency frequently receives less intentional attention**, despite its critical role.

Multiple research-based models reinforce this point:

- **The Simple View of Reading** defines comprehension as the product of word recognition and language comprehension. If either component is weak, comprehension collapses.
- **Scarborough’s Reading Rope** illustrates how multiple strands – phonological skills, vocabulary, background knowledge, and language structures – must be woven together to support skilled reading.
- **The Active View of Reading** expands these models by highlighting the role of self-regulation, engagement, and strategic processing.

Across these frameworks, one conclusion is consistent:

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Fluency is the bridge that allows students to move from accurate decoding to meaningful comprehension.

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Fluency: The overlooked Tier 1 lever

Fluency is commonly misunderstood as reading speed. In reality, fluent reading requires three integrated components:

- **Accuracy** – reading words correctly
- **Automaticity** – reading at an efficient pace without cognitive overload
- **Prosody** – reading with appropriate expression, phrasing, and natural intonation

When students decode accurately but slowly, cognitive resources are consumed by word reading rather than meaning-making. When students read quickly but without expression or phrasing, comprehension also likely suffers.

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True fluency supports understanding, not performance alone.

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For district leaders, the implications are significant. Research indicates that a large proportion of students who struggle on high-stakes comprehension assessments also demonstrate weaknesses in fluency. When fluency is not explicitly addressed in Tier 1 instruction, districts often see:

- **Inflated Tier 2 and Tier 3 caseloads**
- **Increased demand for intervention staff and programs**
- **Persistent gaps despite remediation efforts**

In short, **weak fluency instruction often shifts preventable challenges into costly intervention systems**, increasing staffing demands and straining district resources.

Fluency as prevention within MTSS

Within an effective MTSS framework, Tier 1 instruction should meet the needs of approximately 80% of students. When fluency is embedded intentionally within core instruction, it functions as a **preventive mechanism** reducing the number of students requiring supplemental or intensive support.

Conversely, when fluency instruction is inconsistent or absent:

- **Benchmark assessments identify large numbers of students as below proficiency**
- **Intervention resources are stretched thin**
- **Teachers spend instructional time remediating skills that could have been secured earlier**

From a leadership perspective, fluency should be viewed not as an “extra,” but as a **non-negotiable component of high-quality Tier 1 literacy instruction.**



Evidence-based fluency practices that scale

Research has consistently identified instructional practices that strengthen fluency when implemented systematically. These include:

- **Assisted reading practices** such as choral reading, echo reading, and audio-assisted reading
- **Repeated reading** to build automaticity and accuracy
- **Phrased reading** to support syntactic awareness and meaning-making
- **Performance-based reading**, such as readers’ theater, to increase engagement and prosody

These approaches are effective because they combine explicit modeling, supported practice, and meaningful repetition – key features of instruction that aligns with how students learn.

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For district leaders, the critical question is not whether these practices work, but whether systems are in place to support consistent implementation across classrooms.

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The fluency development lesson: a scalable Tier 1 model

One evidence-based approach that integrates multiple fluency practices is the **Fluency Development Lesson (FDL)**. Designed as a short, structured instructional routine (typically 15–20 minutes), the FDL combines:

- **Explicit modeling of fluent reading**
- **Guided oral reading practices**
- **Vocabulary and comprehension discussion**
- **Opportunities for performance and response**

From a systems perspective, the FDL offers several advantages:

- **Efficiency** – It fits within existing instructional blocks
- **Consistency** – It provides a shared instructional structure for Tier 1 fluency instruction
- **Equity** – All students receive access to evidence-based fluency practices, not only those identified for intervention

When implemented with fidelity, fluency routines like the FDL strengthen comprehension while reducing the need for later remediation.

Strategic implications for district leaders

Districts seeking to improve literacy outcomes and stabilize MTSS systems should consider the following questions:

- **Is fluency explicitly defined within our Tier 1 literacy expectations?**
- **Do our core programs provide sufficient opportunities for guided oral reading and fluency practice?**
- **Are teachers supported with professional learning that goes beyond assessing fluency to *teaching it*?**
- **Does our data reflect oral reading fluency (ORF) patterns that are limiting students' ability to comprehend grade-level text? Could these gaps be addressed earlier through stronger Tier 1 instruction?**

Addressing these questions shifts fluency from a classroom-level tactic to a **district-level strategy**.



Fluency, equity, and sustainability

Strong Tier 1 fluency instruction supports equity by ensuring that all students – not only those receiving intervention – develop the skills needed to access grade-level texts. It also supports sustainability by reducing long-term dependence on intensive services.

When fluency instruction is prioritized:

- **Students comprehend more effectively**
- **Teachers spend less time remediating foundational gaps**
- **Intervention resources can be reserved for students with the greatest need**
- **MTSS systems function as intended**

Moving forward

Fluency is not an optional add-on to literacy instruction.



Fluency serves as the critical connection between decoding and comprehension and is a key factor in whether Tier 1 instruction fulfills its preventive role.



District leaders who examine how fluency is addressed within their core literacy systems (curriculum, professional learning, and instructional time) position their schools to close gaps earlier, reduce intervention overload, and build a more sustainable MTSS framework.

High-quality literacy systems do not rely on remediation to compensate for weak foundations. They invest strategically in Tier 1 instruction so that comprehension, confidence, and achievement can flourish for all students.

Let's talk about your district's literacy goals

[Schedule a consultation today.](#)



About the author

Dr. Lynne Kulich is an educator, researcher, and author with more than 30 years of experience in literacy education. She has served as a professor, curriculum and instruction director, literacy coach, and classroom teacher, with a focus on early literacy and multilingual learners.

Dr. Kulich is the lead author of the bestselling book *The Fluency Development Lesson: Closing the Reading Gap* and regularly presents at national and international education conferences. She holds a doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Akron and a bachelor's degree from The Ohio State University.

