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Sound Start Literacy

Research Foundation & Logic Model



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DEMONSTRATES A RATIONALE

LXD Research Recognition for Sound Start
Literacy



This product has been rigorously evaluated and is hereby acknowledged for meeting the educational impact criteria of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), warranting a **Level 4** for "**Demonstrating a Rationale.**" This recognition is based on its proven effectiveness in enhancing grade-level learning outcomes.

REVIEWED BY THE LXD RESEARCH EXPERT REVIEW PANEL

Rachel Schechter, Ph.D.
Founder of LXD Research

September 20, 2026

DATE

Educators search for high-quality research and evidence-based interventions to strengthen grant applications, to support comprehensive and targeted schools, or to implement new programming in their schools. Evidence requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) are designed to ensure that states, districts, and schools can identify programs, practices, products, and policies that work across various populations.

Educational programs document their evidence of design, effectiveness, and impact in order to be eligible for federal funding. While there is no singular authority that determines a program's tier, the Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology provides standards to assess the varying levels of strength of research for education products.

The categories for ESSA Evidence are: strong (Tier 1), moderate (Tier 2), and promising (Tier 3) evidence of effectiveness, or demonstrates a rationale to be effective (Tier 4).

This product meets the requirements for Tier 4:

- ✓ Documentation of how the product's design relates to intended outcomes, with corresponding academic, published research
- ✓ Describes the product's features and outcomes in a logic model
- ✓ A study is planned and/or currently underway
- ★ A third-party research organization has reviewed the documentation for ESSA validation



When product designers leverage learning sciences to design their programs, educators can better target instruction, and students' skills soar. Through interviews with the product designers, an evaluation of their research-informed activities, and a planning of an efficacy study, this product meets the criteria for LXD Research's ESSA Tier 4 Evidence.

– Rachel Schechter, Ph.D., Founder of LXD Research

What is Sound Start Literacy?

Sound Start Literacy is a research based linguistic phonics program designed to help young learners and striving readers build foundational reading skills by connecting spoken language to written text. Using a structured, systematic method, the program guides students from sounds to corresponding letters and letter patterns so they can recognize, map, and decode words confidently. Lessons incorporate decodable texts, high frequency word practice, and consistent instructional routines to build understanding of the English alphabetic code and strengthen independent reading.



Lesson Presentation Slides

Ready to use presentation slides for each lesson that are compatible with Google Slides and Microsoft PowerPoint.



Complete Lesson Materials

Comprehensive materials provide educators with the resources needed to deliver each lesson with minimal preparation.



Teacher Lesson Plans

Downloadable lesson plans provide clear instructional guidance and help reduce teacher planning time.



Student Practice Materials

Printable activity pages and student texts reinforce new skills while providing cumulative practice with previously learned concepts.



Assessment & Progress Monitoring

Built in assessment tools and progress checks help educators monitor student learning and identify areas that may need additional support.



Implementation Training

Asynchronous online training supports educators in understanding and implementing the Sound Start Literacy program with confidence.



What is Linguistics Phonics?

Linguistic phonics is an evidence based method of reading instruction that connects the sounds of spoken language to letters and spelling patterns. Using a speech to print sequence, students learn how sounds can be represented in different ways in written English.

Instruction explicitly teaches common sound and spelling relationships so students can better understand how the English code works. This systematic method strengthens decoding, spelling, and reading fluency.



Sound Start Literacy Logic Model

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Early literacy development depends on students receiving explicit, systematic instruction that helps them understand how spoken language connects to printed text. A substantial body of research demonstrates that systematic phonics instruction integrated with phonemic awareness, spelling, and cumulative practice improves students' word reading, spelling, with downstream benefits for broader reading achievement (Ehri et al., 2001; Ehri, 2020). Yet, many K–3 classrooms continue to rely on fragmented instructional materials or approaches that require teachers to assemble lessons, assessments, and intervention resources from multiple sources, creating variability in instruction and increasing teacher planning demands. Teachers need comprehensive instructional materials that translate the science of reading into daily classroom practice while supporting consistent implementation. Sound Start Literacy addresses this need by providing a comprehensive K–3 speech-to-print linguistic phonics program that combines systematic instruction, integrated assessment, cumulative practice, and asynchronous professional learning to help teachers deliver evidence-based literacy instruction and support students' development of foundational reading and writing skills.

RESOURCES

What resources are or could be available?

Curriculum

Sound Start Literacy is a linguistic phonics program for students in grades K–3. It is delivered through daily 30-minute, systematic lessons that connect speech-to-print and build cumulatively from Basic Code to Advanced Code across six foundational literacy skill areas:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension
- Sentence-level writing

Morphological instruction is included at every grade level, increasing in complexity from K to 3.

Instructional Materials

- Daily Google/MS PowerPoint slides presentations (12+ slides/lesson)

STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

What will the activities, events, and such be?

Teachers

- Access asynchronous online training at their own pace
- Open and teach each day's 30-minute *Sound Start Literacy* lesson using ready-to-teach presentations, lesson plans, and printables
- Follow a structured, day-by-day lesson sequence that moves students through sound introduction, picture- and story-based visual connections, and word sorting, then into longer-word spelling (on paper or whiteboards), decoding practice, and sentence reading
- Explicitly teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and sentence-level writing within each lesson sequence
- Implement systematic speech-to-print instruction that progresses from Basic Code to Advanced Code



Sound Start Literacy Logic Model

RESOURCES (CONT.)

What resources are or could be available?

- Downloadable Teacher's Manual:
 - adaptable 5-day lesson sequences
 - appendix of written procedures for activities and assessments
 - ReadWorks Article-a-Day links to build background knowledge and vocabulary
- Printables
 - Sound Wall posters
 - High-frequency ("Oddball") word cards
 - Games
 - Fictional and informational texts
 - Progress Checks for every lesson
 - Diagnostic assessment tools covering phonemic awareness, code knowledge, decoding, and spelling

Professional Learning & Supports

- One-year of asynchronous online professional learning
- Teacher implementation guidance
- Assessment administration guidance
- Instructional routines designed to support implementation fidelity

STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES (CONT.)

What will the activities, events, and such be?

- Introduce new sound-spelling correspondences through picture- and story-based visual connections
- Facilitate quick review and independent practice using printable games and word cards
- Post Sound Wall materials and high-frequency "Oddball" words as an ongoing reference for students
- Build background knowledge and vocabulary through the ReadWorks Article-a-Day routine (optional)
- Engage students in multimodal instruction that reinforces skills through multiple channels: speaking, listening, reading, spelling, writing, and word manipulation activities
- Administer progress checks and diagnostic assessments one-on-one or in small groups to monitor phonemic awareness, code knowledge, decoding, and spelling, and use results to guide instruction

Students

- Participate in daily speech-to-print literacy instruction
- Explore sounds through multimodal instruction, including phonemic awareness activities, word sorting, spelling, decoding practice, and sentence-level reading and writing
- Sharpen fluency and recall through printable games and word cards, played independently, in pairs, or in small groups
- Reference posted Sound Wall materials and high-frequency words during independent reading and spelling
- Build background knowledge and vocabulary by previewing new words, reading or listening to articles, and discussing or recording their learning in their "Book of Knowledge"



Sound Start Literacy Logic Model

OUTPUTS

What are the initial products of these activities?

Teachers

- Complete asynchronous training to implement the program with fidelity
- Deliver a Sound Start Literacy lesson using the corresponding presentation and lesson plan
- Implement systematic instruction across all six foundational literacy domains
- Administer diagnostic assessments and weekly Progress Checks
- Differentiate instruction using assessment results
- Build student's background knowledge and vocabulary through cumulative review

Students

- Engage in daily, systematic speech-to-print phonics lessons that build from Basic Code to Advanced Code
- Reinforce skills using activity pages, games, word cards, and Sound Wall materials
- Complete phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, decoding, reading, and writing activities
- Demonstrate learning through diagnostic assessments and Progress Checks

SHORT-TERM AND INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

- Teachers will implement the program with confidence and fidelity after completing asynchronous training.
- Teachers will consistently deliver systematic, speech-to-print phonics instruction using program materials.
- Teachers will effectively use diagnostic and weekly progress-check data to monitor and differentiate instruction.
- Students will demonstrate improved phonemic awareness and ability to connect speech sounds to print.
- Students will apply the alphabetic code to decode words and read connected text with increasing accuracy, progressing from Basic Code to Advanced Code skills.
- Students will build background knowledge and vocabulary.
- Students will engage in reading and writing practice through consistent participation in lessons and reinforcement activities.
- Students will improve reading fluency and sentence-level writing skills through cumulative, connected practice.



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LONG-TERM OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

- Teachers will sustain high-quality implementation of evidence-based literacy instruction.
- Teachers will use ongoing assessment data to differentiate instruction and support diverse learners, including striving readers.
- Students will achieve grade-level reading and writing proficiency and independence.
- Students will develop confidence and motivation as readers and writers.
- Students will transfer decoding, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary skills to reading and writing across content areas.
- Students will develop the literacy knowledge and skills necessary for long-term academic success and lifelong learning.

ASSUMPTIONS

- Teachers are given the time and support to complete asynchronous training.
- Teachers have reliable access to the technology (computer, projection screen/board, WiFi) required to deliver slides-based lessons.
- Administrators provide the time and printing access to prepare printable materials ahead of each lesson.
- Administrators protect a daily instructional block so teachers can deliver the program's lessons on a regular, uninterrupted schedule.



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Sound Start Literacy

Foundational Research Summary

Description of Product:

Sound Start Literacy is a K–3 speech-to-print, linguistic phonics program designed with a teacher-first approach, streamlining every aspect of phonics instruction for classroom teachers and interventionists. Sound Start Literacy provides daily 30-minute lesson slides, a downloadable teacher manual, printables, diagnostic assessments, and built-in progress checks for every lesson in one comprehensive platform. The program equips teachers with everything they need to open a lesson and deliver instruction with confidence, eliminating the need to spend additional time planning, organizing, or assembling materials. Every lesson is intentionally designed to move students systematically from Basic Code to Advanced Code, building phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and sentence-level writing within a single integrated sequence, with the same routines held consistent across all four grade levels. Created by Jennifer Cerra, an elementary classroom teacher for 18 years and an Orton-Gillingham-certified instructor and trainer, *Sound Start Literacy* grew from her exploration of linguistic phonics research into ready-to-teach lessons. The lesson implementation is supported by a professional learning model that has teachers watch each routine modeled on video before applying it in their own classroom. The result is more confident, consistent phonics instruction for teachers, and stronger decoding, spelling, and reading skills for students.

Sound Start Literacy applies systematic, linguistic phonics instructional design at every level, from curriculum to lesson, to deliver consistent code instruction.

Systematic, Cumulative Code Instruction

K–3 reading outcomes depend on systematic, fully guided code instruction, but many teachers are left to assemble that instruction from multiple sources, which introduces variation in sequence, pace, and coverage (Brown et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2012). Systematic phonics instruction produces better word-reading and spelling outcomes than incidental or embedded approaches, with the advantage largest in the earliest grades, and works best when it progresses through sound-spelling correspondences in a fixed, cumulative sequence, without deferring harder patterns to later grades (Ehri et al., 2001; Foorman et al., 2016). Skilled word reading depends on bonding spoken sounds to their spellings in memory, a process that requires sound



to be established before spelling (Ehri, 2014). Phonemic awareness instruction can be strengthened by explicitly connecting speech sounds to their corresponding letters (Rice et al., 2022), while well-specified phonological representations support efficient word learning and reading development (Kilpatrick, 2015).

Sound Start Literacy provides a complete, ready-to-teach lesson set for every grade level so teachers do not need to assemble one from multiple sources, following a fixed Basic Code to Advanced Code sequence that begins advanced-vowel work in Kindergarten instead of deferring it (Brown et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2012; Foorman et al., 2016). Within each lesson, every new sound is introduced orally first through an Auditory Connection: students hear the target word spoken, say it aloud themselves, and attend to their own mouth movements, building the precise phonological representation that determines how efficiently a new word can be learned (Kilpatrick, 2015), before the spelling is shown in a Visual Connection, so that sound is established before print and letters are present from the earliest phonemic awareness practice (Ehri, 2014; Rice et al., 2022).

A downloadable teacher's manual for each grade level provides a day-by-day lesson plan pre-sequenced to match an accompanying slide presentation and printable student pages. This lets a teacher open the materials and teach directly from them instead of designing the lesson, closing the gap in teacher preparation around language structure that a complete, pre-specified program is designed to compensate for (Moats, 1999, 2009; Piasta & Hudson, 2022).

Morphological Instruction

Morphological awareness is the ability to recognize and manipulate morphemes, the smallest meaningful units of language, including prefixes, suffixes, and roots (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2007). It is distinct and teachable in its own right, not an incidental byproduct of vocabulary instruction (Apel, 2014). Morphological intervention produces significant gains in phonological awareness, morphological awareness, vocabulary, and reading comprehension (Goodwin & Ahn, 2010). These effects are strongest for struggling readers, English language learners, and students with learning disabilities, and are largest when morphology instruction is embedded within phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction (Goodwin & Ahn, 2010). As texts grow more complex, morphological awareness also supports reading comprehension directly, since students increasingly need to infer the meaning of unfamiliar, multimorphemic words from their component parts (Levesque, Kieffer, & Deacon, 2019).

Sound Start Literacy weaves morphological instruction directly into its Basic Code to Advanced Code phonics sequence, consistent with evidence that morphological instruction is most effective



when integrated with phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction (Goodwin & Ahn, 2010). Kindergarten lessons introduce inflectional suffixes such as -s, -es, -ed, and -ing, building students' ability to recognize how these small, meaningful word parts change a word's form (Apel, 2014). This expands to a wide range of prefixes and suffixes by Grade 2, and to derivational prefixes, suffixes, and Greek and Latin roots by Grade 3, building students' ability to infer the meaning of unfamiliar, multimorphemic words from their component parts as the texts they read grow more complex (Levesque, Kieffer, & Deacon, 2019).

Sound Start Literacy uses active, retrieval-based practice to strengthen word-level automaticity.

Retrieval-Based Practice

Automaticity develops through frequent, active retrieval practice distributed over time, rather than through passive review alone (Hudson et al., 2012). Interactive practice and repeated retrieval help students build automaticity more effectively (Chi & Wylie, 2014). That retrieval takes several forms: segmenting a word's sounds with fingers, sorting words by spelling pattern, and writing a word from memory all require a student to actively produce something rather than simply recognize it. Spelling is the most demanding of these forms because writing a word requires retrieving its full spelling from memory, a harder task than recognizing it while reading, which is why pairing encoding with decoding strengthens word-level retrieval more than decoding alone (Weiser & Mathes, 2011; Ouellette, Martin-Chang, & Rossi, 2017; Ehri, 2014).

Every *Sound Start Literacy* routine calls for an observable, retrieval-based student response, moving well beyond passive review. Students practice through finger-segmenting, word sorting, spelling longer words and mixed mapping pages, where students retrieve and write a target spelling for each sound, and choral reading of highlighted target spellings. Every new sound-spelling correspondence is paired with spelling practice rather than recognition alone (Weiser & Mathes, 2011; Ouellette, Martin-Chang, & Rossi, 2017).

High-Frequency Word Instruction

High-frequency words that do not follow regular sound-spelling patterns are traditionally taught through rote, whole-word memorization, a method that treats each word as an unpredictable exception to be drilled, when in fact it can be partly decoded (Farrell, Hunter, & Osenga, 2019). A linguistic phonics approach instead maps each word's regular, decodable parts explicitly and flags only the irregular parts for memorization; the whole word is never treated as unpredictable. (Farrell et al., 2019). Because automaticity depends on frequent, active retrieval practice and not



on passive review, students also need repeated opportunities to retrieve and apply that same regular-irregular mapping across many words and contexts (Chi & Wylie, 2014; Hudson et al., 2012).

Sound Start Literacy's high-frequency word instruction applies this same regular-irregular mapping through Build Automaticity lists and the Oddball word routine, both of which teach words by identifying their regular, decodable parts and explicitly flagging only the irregular parts, rather than asking students to memorize the whole word (Farrell et al., 2019). Students get repeated, active retrieval practice through printable games such as Roll and Read, Tic-Tac-Toe, and Chomp, as well as activities such as the Listening Game and Sound Swap, a word-chaining activity. These activities can be played independently, in pairs, or in small groups, giving students many chances to retrieve the same words across different game formats instead of repeating a single drill.

The Sound Start Literacy program embeds frequent formative assessment to drive instructional decisions.

Curriculum-embedded assessment improves achievement when results are close enough to instruction to actually change what a teacher does next, rather than simply recording progress after the fact (Black & Wiliam, 2009). That effect is strongest when assessment is frequent and tied directly to the instructional sequence, rather than administered periodically (Xuan et al., 2022).

Sound Start Literacy provides a Progress Check for all students at the end of every five-day lesson cycle, embedding assessment within the instructional sequence instead of delaying it to an end-of-unit or benchmark test (Black & Wiliam, 2009). The program does not require students to pass the Progress Check before moving to new content. In practice, a student who does not meet a benchmark can receive additional small-group instruction on the same skill until a later progress check shows the skill has been mastered. This reflects research showing that formative assessment's strongest effects occur when teachers use results to adjust grouping and instruction, not to gate advancement (Klute, Aphorp, Harlacher, & Reale, 2017). The whole class advances on the same five-day schedule regardless of individual results, and previously taught patterns continue to appear through daily cumulative review.

Progress Monitoring

Assessment serves two distinct purposes in a well-designed literacy program: diagnosing the specific skills a student has or has not yet mastered so instruction can be adjusted immediately,



and periodically screening all students to catch reading difficulties before they become entrenched (Kilpatrick, 2015). The first kind of assessment works best when it responds to what a specific skill requires in real time, catching a gap the moment it emerges, well ahead of the next scheduled checkpoint (Xuan, Cheung, & Sun, 2022).

Sound Start Literacy's Progress Monitoring routines reflect this distinction. On Day 5 of every five-day lesson cycle, at every grade level K–3, teachers administer a dictated spelling/word assessment and collect papers, then pull students individually for a reading assessment, giving teachers curriculum-embedded evidence of mastery at the same frequency as instruction itself (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Xuan, Cheung, & Sun, 2022). Four diagnostic tools are administered as needed rather than on a fixed schedule, so a teacher can pinpoint precisely where a student's difficulty lies rather than waiting for the next checkpoint: a Phonemic Awareness Diagnostic, Phonics Diagnostics, an Oddball Words Diagnostic, and an Intermediate Spelling Assessment and Analysis (Kilpatrick, 2015). Universal screening, DIBELS 8, at benchmark points across the year complements this embedded assessment, identifying at a system level which students may need more intensive intervention before gaps widen (Kilpatrick, 2015).

Sound Start Literacy's professional learning is designed around what transfers to practice, pairing modeling with immediate classroom application.

What predicts whether a professional development program improves teaching is not the idea it teaches, but whether it gives teachers a concrete strategy for putting that idea into practice in their own classroom (Kennedy, 2016). Conventional measures such as total hours or expert facilitation predict outcomes far less reliably (Kennedy, 2016). Programs that combine this kind of concrete, practice-based strategy with sustained duration see the strongest effects (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007).

Sound Start Literacy's professional learning follows a 'watch, then try' model, in which teachers see each routine modeled on video and then apply it in their own classroom. The same routines are held consistently across all four grade levels, so the investment carries across a K–3 adoption. Training can then focus entirely on how to deliver each routine well, since every lesson is already fully built and ready to teach, with no instructional materials left to assemble. This holds regardless of delivery medium, as online professional development depends on the same design features as in-person training, not the format itself (Stavermann, 2025). The program's professional learning is delivered through a sequenced, one-year asynchronous video course covering program materials, instructional principles, instructional strategies, and assessment/small-group instruction, totaling approximately 7 hours. Each grade level includes 29



lessons, and written procedures are preserved in the Teacher's Manual appendix so routines persist after the training-access window closes.

Existing Studies on Product Effectiveness

Sound Start Literacy has been used in pilot schools, where teachers have shared feedback about their experience implementing the program, and a formal efficacy study with pilot schools is planned to build on these early findings. The evidence to date includes teacher feedback from pilot schools and benchmark data tracked internally by the developer. Pilot schools have reported encouraging early results. Approximately 90% of students were at or above the DIBELS benchmark by the end of the second year of implementation. Schools also reported a reduction in the proportion of students requiring intensive intervention compared with their prior program. These preliminary findings and ongoing teacher feedback are informing the design of a forthcoming efficacy study with pilot schools.

Conclusion

Sound Start Literacy brings together four core strengths: a specified instructional sequence, retrieval-based practice, formative assessment, and professional learning designed to transfer directly to classroom practice. The instructional sequence integrates curriculum, pacing, and individual lessons, with morphology incorporated alongside phonics as a core component. Formative assessment guides small-group instruction without determining when students advance. Ready-to-teach lessons allow professional learning to focus on delivering each routine effectively rather than on assembling instructional materials. Together, these features give K–3 teachers a consistent, evidence-aligned approach to teaching linguistic phonics. The goal is to help students build the decoding, spelling, and comprehension skills that support later reading and writing.



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