

Iowa Reading Research Center (IRRC) Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

September 18, 2024

10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

B100, Grimes State Office Building, Des Moines, IA and Zoom

Members Present: Mindy VanZuiden (Chair), President, Decoding Dyslexia Iowa; Beth Happe (Vice-Chair), Principal, Martensdale-St. Mary's Community School District; Stacey Cole, Superintendent, Storm Lake Community School District; Kathleen Konrardy, Principal, Holy Family Catholic Schools; Erick Pruitt, Superintendent, Ankeny Community School District; Cori Stanley, Parent and Instruction Coach, Indianola Community School District; Wanda Steuri, Education Program Consultant, Iowa Department of Education; Papae Wymore, Lecturer at Central College

Additional Attendees: Tina Wahlert, School Improvement Bureau Chief, Iowa Department of Education; Tom Wood, Learner Strategies & Supports Bureau Chief, Iowa Department of Education; Shawn Datchuk, Director, Iowa Reading Research Center; Leah Zimmermann, Research Fellow, Iowa Reading Research Center; Nikki Hodous, Associate Director of Operations & Project Management, Iowa Reading Research Center

1. Call to order

The meeting was called to order by Mindy VanZuiden.

2. Approval of agenda

On a motion by Erick Pruitt, seconded by Kathleen Konrardy, the agenda for the meeting was approved with zero "no" votes.

3. Approval of April meeting minutes

On a motion by Beth Happe, the April 2024 meeting minutes were approved with zero "no" votes.

4. Public comment

No public comments

5. Iowa Department of Education updates

Tina Wahlert summarized the current work of the Department of Education (DE). Currently, the top priority is to use all available licenses for LETRS training. The state is currently working on Cohort 4

registrations with 4,463 educators currently signed up. This cohort was opened up to middle school teachers and faculty members working in teaching preparation in institutions of higher education (IHEs).

The DE entered into a contract with EPS Learning and Amira, and the program started in the summer. Tom Wood shared that Amira is an AI reading assistant that listens to students read and gives feedback. Amira has received lots of positive feedback from teachers. Teachers have licenses to use it through the summer, so it can also be used in summer school. Wanda Steuri suggested that members sign up for the DE Literacy News Listserv for to learn more about Amira.

VanZuiden asked whether Amira can be used by the homeschool population. Wood responded that this has been discussed as a possibility. The issue is with the potential for parent coaching while students are reading, as Amira is more appropriate for in-school intervention with no adult feedback. Wahlert adds that EPS has been helpful to work with and expresses an interest in getting non-public schools into this work. She is unsure about access for homeschool.

Pruitt asked what hardware is needed to use Amira. Wood responded that users need headphones with a microphone. Amira can be used with commonly used sign-on platforms (e.g., Clever). Wahlert adds that they are currently doing a few trainings a week, and interested members could join one of those to learn more about the logistics.

Happe asked whether the department will provide more guidance on personalized reading plans, particularly at the building level. Wahlert responded that they will be releasing FAQs and sample guidance soon.

Papae Wymore asked about guidance on remediation for the Foundations of Reading exam and what it should look like when teacher preparation candidates do not pass the assessment.

6. IRRC director's report

Shawn Datchuk presented the bylaws of the IRRC Advisory Council and invited members to take a look specifically at the bylaw related to reviewing IRRC projects. He reviewed the IRRC legislative priorities and noted that the council will later discuss how these priorities align with the scope of work. Specifically, he pointed out a code related to the Dyslexia Specialist Endorsement (DSE). The IRRC has oversight responsibility for IHEs looking to start up a DSE program, including content standards. Datchuk noted that the IRRC is funded through state appropriation and hosted by the UI College of Education, so mentorship of students is a key priority.

Datchuk shared the background behind his purpose for this work. His mother was a Chinese immigrant who struggled with learning English and had missed opportunities for getting more education. This motivated him to become a special education teacher. As a special education teacher in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, he worked in a K–12 district with diverse students. Most students were 2–3 grade levels behind in reading proficiency. This experience taught him that literacy is a national problem. Datchuk has been a faculty member for 12 years at the University of Iowa. He has researched literacy instruction and assessment for K–12 students, particularly those who are struggling. He has received \$5 million in grants, particularly for personnel preparation.

Datchuk asserted that the director and staff are not the “face” of the IRRC; children and parents/guardians are “the face,” and the IRRC is there to serve them. The IRRC’s purpose is to speak clearly about what works and doesn’t work and make research-based suggestions to improve student outcomes. Many caregivers of K–12 students visit the IRRC website and view the IRRC as a trusted source of literacy information. It is an important responsibility to be a trusted, research-based source. Datchuk discussed the importance of a translational science approach. This approach is different from “research-to-practice,” which leads to research-to-practice gap because dissemination alone is not effective. Translational science involves centering collaboration around stakeholders (i.e., teachers, students, and caregivers). The IRRC’s role as a research center is to have clear communication about research and evidence-based practices. Additionally, it is important to mentor practitioners. This involves moving from exploratory to developmental to efficacy to effectiveness research, following a “public health” approach. The IRRC is in a unique position in the state because it is at the intersection of research, dissemination, technical assistance, and public policy, with research at the center. Datchuk and the IRRC have developed projects that capitalize on all aspects of the “IRRC Core,” the overlap of research, dissemination, technical assistance, and public policy.

Wymore expressed an interest in seeing preservice teachers included in the translational science model. Datchuk pointed out that, currently, preservice teachers are not specifically identified in the scope of work. Pruitt asked if the reading methods courses in IHEs aligned to the research from the IRRC. Datchuk responded that the IRRC does not have legislative authority related to oversight of reading methods courses; the only authority the IRRC has pertains to the Dyslexia Specialist Endorsement program. Many IHEs have contacted the IRRC about the Foundations of Reading assessment and related remediation. One current project is related to this legislation and geared toward preservice teachers taking that exam.

Datchuk outlined the IRRC’s current priorities: re-establishing research, successfully executing the DE’s contract, and increasing revenue streams. The last IRRC research project was in 2021. Research is critical in order to provide high-quality technical assistance because technical assistance must be aligned to the evidence base. The IRRC’s unique role of researchers and experts is to engage in high-quality research, ask deep questions, and make complex findings understandable to teachers and caregivers. The IRRC can examine primary research investigations and use those to make recommendations.

Appropriation from DE requires that the IRRC provides free services to all of Iowa. To continue providing these services, Datchuk stated that a current priority is to build up the IRRC’s required reserve as a center housed in the University of Iowa. This reserve is helpful in case appropriation is decreased, and it will ensure that IRRC staff salaries can be paid.

VanZuiden asked if the IRRC has received additional funding for Dyslexia Specialist Endorsement (DSE) scholarships. Datchuk responded that there have not been additional funds from the state for scholarships as there were at the beginning of certification. As such, the IRRC has paid the difference between tuition at UI and tuition at other IHEs, but this is not sustainable moving forward. Datchuk added that other DSE programs (Grandview) are much more affordable than the UI program. VanZuiden commented that funding scholarships has been a top priority of DDIA.

Pruitt inquired whether staff salary was part of the \$1.5 million appropriation. Datchuk responded that, yes, 92–93% of the appropriation pays for staff salaries, and the IRRC had been dipping into reserve funds for travel related to technical assistance. Pruitt asked whether salaries are set by the university and whether staff receive cost-of-living raises. Datchuk and Hodous responded that salaries are set by UI, but staff do not receive annual, regular cost-of-living raises.

Datchuk underscored the importance of alignment between legislative priorities, state funding, the scope of work, and projects and initiatives is critical for the IRRC. The IRRC needs to minimize projects and initiatives that do not fall within the legislative priorities. For the past two years, the IRRC has spent from the required reserve, and thus must be more cautious and strategic about spending. The IRRC is working to rebuild the required reserve and diversify revenue streams (e.g., sales of products outside of Iowa, federal government, state agencies, private donors). This would allow the IRRC to pursue items that fall outside of the annual scope of work.

Pruitt asked whether the IRRC is selling products and services outside of Iowa. Datchuk responded affirmatively and provided the example of the Nebraska DE purchasing eLearning and licenses.

As part of the scope of work, the IRRC has partnered with 15 school districts throughout the state.

Datchuk provided an overview of current IRRC projects. All current projects incorporate IRRC Core. The IRRC is requesting feedback from the Advisory Council on 5 projects.

- **LIFTER:** The LIFTER handwriting application was developed by Datchuk and Dr. Derek Rodgers (University of Iowa), and it is aligned to state policy (i.e., the new handwriting standards). The technical assistance team has provided support with this application. This application aims to solve the problem of practice in which a lack of alignment is evident between phonics and handwriting curricula. The application allows teachers to create handwriting curriculum based on a phonics scope and sequence. Handwriting practice sheets and models of pronouncing letter-sounds and forming the letters are provided. Materials include an eLearning module for caregivers to use at home. School partners and teachers have provided great feedback. Feedback from Iowa teachers has been incorporated into LIFTER through small changes. Since its launch in July, there have been 16,000 views and 5,000 downloads.
- **CLIFTER:** The IRRC is conducting a systematic review on cursive handwriting instruction. This includes examining the best methods for teaching cursive (e.g., different cursive handwriting styles) and examining relations between handwriting instruction and reading ability. On the technical assistance side, the IRRC is developing CLIFTER, a cursive version of LIFTER. This also will be free to teachers, with an anticipated release date of April 2025. Pruitt asked whether the IRRC is examining differences in how students are interacting with the text (e.g., physical text versus text on devices) as part of the meta-analysis. Datchuk responded that the IRRC will consider this point. Pruitt added that there is a fine line between incorporating technology in a meaningful way and overusing technology.
- **Caregiver Data Literacy:** This project aims to create a streamlined process for caregivers interested in engaging with the IRRC. There has been an increase in caregiver questions related to students' literacy data. The IRRC has developed a Caregivers Resource Hub to support this. In addition, this project aims to help parents understand students' literacy data (e.g., different assessment types, interpretations of different assessment scores). This project has two parts: a

systematic review of legislation and a parent/caregiver survey of knowledge and perceptions of literacy assessment data.

- VanZuiden inquired whether the survey for parents/caregivers could include items about the assistive technology consultation which was critical to her children's reading development. Zimmermann acknowledged that this was a good idea. Datchuk agreed and noted that there might be potential to create and administer a survey specific to assistive technology. This fell outside the scope of work for this fiscal year. However, the IRRC is still supporting parents/caregivers with assistive technology appointments. A method to contact IRRC about assistive technology is currently being developed. VanZuiden asked what the IRRC's recommendations are for when someone is contacted by parents/caregivers. Datchuk instructed anyone in this situation to walk through their rights related to IDEA and refer to trusted sources (e.g., ASK Center, DDIA). VanZuiden noted that DDIA has developed a list of resources for caregivers looking for support. Datchuk added that the Caregiver Hub content and the parent/guardian resource sheet can be used at conferences to help others understand and ask questions about students' literacy data.
- **Core Data-Based Decision Making (DBDM):** This project focuses on the decision rules and processes that schools use to determine when it is appropriate to change core instruction in particular classes. For example, there is research suggesting that class median scores can inform instructional decisions. The target audience for dissemination of this project includes school leaders, administrators, and instructional coaches. The IRRC is creating an eLearning module for using the tool and decision rules. The IRRC is also creating a spreadsheet that educators can use to identify classwide needs and engage in problem solving.
- **Measure FIRST:** School partners often ask for support in modeling fidelity of implementation. In the past, the IRRC would provide fidelity rubrics to partners. However, this support can be improved. The IRRC is developing the Measure FIRST application that MTSS staff can use to create custom fidelity checklists or established measures of evidence-based practices to monitor instruction. This application can be used by schools or districts to customize fidelity monitoring and track fidelity across the district and within schools and classrooms. The IRRC is also creating an eLearning module that will support the development of knowledge and skills needed to create fidelity checklists.

7. Adjourn

On a motion by Konrardy, seconded by Wymore, the meeting adjourned.

