

Iowa Reading Research Center (IRRC) Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

April 23, 2025

10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Grimes State Office Building, Des Moines, IA and Zoom

Members Present: Mindy VanZuiden (Chair), President, Decoding Dyslexia Iowa; Beth Happe (Vice-Chair), Principal and Elementary Curricular Director, Martensdale-St. Mary's Community School District; Papae Wymore, Lecturer, Central College; Jason Plourde, Chief Administrator, Green Hills Area Education Agency; Cori Stanley, Parent and Instructional Coach, Indianola Community School District; Wanda Steuri, Dyslexia and Science of Reading Consultant, Iowa Department of Education; Gwen Marra (virtual), Professor, Dordt University; McKenzie Snow, Director, Iowa Department of Education

Additional Attendees: Keller Young, Postdoctoral Research Scholar, Iowa Reading Research Center; Leah Zimmermann, Assistant Director, Iowa Reading Research Center; Shawn Datchuk, Director, Iowa Reading Research Center; Nikki Bodey (virtual), Associate Director of Operations and Project Management, Iowa Reading Research Center; Darcie Kress, Learner Strategies and Supports Administrative Consultant, Iowa Department of Education

1. Call to order

The meeting was called to order by Mindy VanZuiden.

2. Approval of agenda

On a motion by Papae Wymore, seconded by Wanda Steuri, the agenda for the meeting was approved with zero "no" votes.

3. Approval of December 2024 meeting minutes

On a motion by Cori Stanley, seconded by Steuri, the December 2024 meeting minutes were approved with zero "no" votes.

4. Public comments

No public comments

5. Updates from the Iowa Department of Education

The Iowa Department of Education (DE) is welcoming Dr. Darcie Kress to the literacy team.

The DE is implementing Amira—an AI-powered reading assistant being used with +90,000 students in 242 districts. Users have noted positive impact on growth and achievement. The DE is looking for ways to sustain and integrate Amira into summer programs.

The division of special education is investing in the online software of UPAR (Universal Protocol for Accommodations in Reading). All districts can apply now to access the software. The DE appreciates the council helping spread awareness of these significant investments.

Mindy VanZuiden inquired whether students in a homeschool assistance program with PowerSchool numbers have access to these online tools. The DE responded that non-public schools will have access to Amira, but it is unclear whether homeschool families will have the same access. Steuri offered to reach out to colleagues to find out more.

The DE provided an update on statewide contracts. The department conducted a request for proposals to identify and establish statewide contracts with negotiated pricing for high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) aligned with Iowa's academic standards for English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics. During a competitive bidding process, publisher submissions were first reviewed to ensure they met rigorous evaluation criteria and achieved the highest levels of quality assessed by EdReports. These submissions were then reviewed and scored by a team of literacy and mathematics experts. The department is excited to announce that HQIM contracts have been published, and all districts can utilize the negotiated prices now. While not exhaustive, the list contains HQIM aligned with Iowa's content standards. The purchasing list should not be confused with an "approved" list. More information can be found on the [DE website](#).

The DE welcomed Kress, who joined at 10:11 a.m., to the meeting and provided some background on her experience. She began her career as a classroom teacher in Pleasant Valley, and she has served as an ELP coordinator in Iowa City for the last four years.

Steuri spoke about the Dyslexia Handbook, which was a recommendation of the Dyslexia Task Force. The Dyslexia Board has been working on this handbook for several years, and it has finally been approved. It is now available on the [DE's dyslexia web page](#). Steuri is providing training around the state. Dates of future trainings are listed online. All stakeholders can attend, and no registration is required.

Snow spoke about LETRS training. The sixth training window is now open. PK–5 public school educators, higher education professionals, special education educators, and administrators are eligible to register. So far, 355 individuals have registered. In total, 220 districts have at least one person who has engaged in this contract with LETRS.

The DE literacy team is leading two professional development (PD) opportunities this summer to support learners with disabilities. Teaching for Impact: Training for All Educators Supporting Learners With Disabilities will take place June 5–6. Featured topics include early childhood education and school-based behavioral health support. Emphasis will be placed on integrating information into practice across various educational settings. Registration is free and is open until May 21.

The Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) plan will release a subgrant application for districts. More information can be found on the [web page for the grant on the DE website](#) and the Literacy News You Can Use newsletter.

6. IRRC director's report

Shawn Datchuk thanked the advisory council and VanZuiden for her compassionate leadership. He thanked Kathleen Konrardy for her time on committee, as she will be ending her term soon.

Datchuk reviewed the agenda for the day, which included review of bylaws, updates for current projects, future scope-of-work planning, and budget and year-to-date metrics.

Datchuk reviewed the bylaws, highlighting the council's role and the IRRC's desire to have perspective, guidance, and ideas from the council.

Leah Zimmermann provided updates regarding the Caregiver Data Literacy project. This project aims to help caregivers become involved in their children's learning, supporting their success. The project supports meaningful partnerships between caregivers and educators: Caregivers need help understanding their children's literacy data, and educators need help communicating with caregivers in a way they can understand.

In January, the IRRC released the English "Understanding Your Student's Literacy Data" eLearning module. It provides information on different assessments and universal screeners, definitions of important assessment-related terms, and examples of common literacy assessments and score reports in Iowa. It also explains how teachers use data from these assessments to make instructional decisions. It provides caregivers will a list of questions they can ask educators to stay informed and make critical decisions regarding their children's learning.

Zimmermann demonstrated some features of the module, including cartoons of classroom scenarios.

The Spanish version of the module was released this week.

The module includes the Caregiver Data Discussion Tool—a resource to help caregivers plan meetings with teachers about their children's literacy data. The tool includes a list of questions, a place to take notes, and a place to write next steps agreed upon by both the caregiver and educator.

The module also includes the Educator Letter Builder—a tool teachers can use as a supplement to reports on universal screening data. Zimmermann demonstrated how to use the tool to customize letters based on the assessment type, assessment window, and scores. The letter directs caregivers to additional resources, such as the IRRC Caregivers Resource Hub.

Datchuk thanked the advisory council for the feedback during the December meeting regarding how the module could be perceived. This feedback led the team to create the Educator Letter Builder. He emphasized that the module and tools do not replace anything that the DE or others do; rather, they serve as a supplement.

Jason Plourde expressed appreciation for the letter builder and emphasized the importance of getting the tool into the hands of teachers. Datchuk agreed, noting that the IRRC needs to be strategic about dissemination plans to get more research-based tools into classrooms. Some of the new dissemination ideas in the next scope of work include webinars and telehealth offerings.

Snow commented that she would like to include information about the Spanish version of the module in the monthly superintendent webinar/newsletter.

Advisory council members shared ideas for ways to spread the word about the Caregiver Data Literacy project and associated tools. Some ideas included monthly curriculum director webinars and monthly AEA meetings. Wymore suggested sharing news with IACTE on a quarterly or biannual basis. Gwen Marra proposed presenting at the Summit for Higher Ed or Teaching for Impact, and Snow suggested presenting at Teaching for Impact as well. For spreading awareness with parents and caregivers, Snow suggested reaching out to ASK Resource Center, the Reading League Iowa branch, and Decoding Dyslexia Iowa.

Datchuk moved to discuss future dissemination plans. The future scope of work incorporates more dissemination opportunities for each project. For example, Lindsay Seydel is creating a standardized slide deck for PD presentations. Secondly, the IRRC plans to create facilitator guides for all upcoming projects and work. Guides will break down the research evidence and explain how to apply it in practical settings. Datchuk is helping AEAs review PD slide content, and in the future, IRRC slide decks will be available to all Iowans as well.

Plourde asked about the structure of the proposed “telehealth” services. These services are based off the IRRC’s work with the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health. They are not the same as a webinar, but more like office hours. A name change was suggested (either “office hours” or “telesupport”). Snow commented that the DE has provided similar services regarding teacher standards and the implementation cycle. She affirmed that the services have been successful for them.

The IRRC then shifted to discuss CLIFTER. The team began by showing the animated ad. This module and tool includes more than 100 different videos in order to demonstrate connections between letters (as opposed to print letters, which are not connected). There are 150 printables embedded into it. CLIFTER is grounded in the findings of the IRRC’s systematic review on cursive instruction, which arose from the screening of thousands of articles on cursive instruction. CLIFTER will include a 5-lesson module about research and application of cursive instruction, mirroring the structure of LIFTER. The center plans to release CLIFTER on June 2.

Steuri commented that spelling will be a concern. There ought to be a way to determine whether a student has been introduced to a given phoneme/grapheme. She wondered if there was a sequence in which different spelling patterns should be introduced.

Datchuk agreed that it could be helpful to include a suggested scope and sequence, but he also wants to provide teachers the flexibility to pick and choose. Importantly, CLIFTER should be taught after LIFTER to ensure that all letters are learned.

Steuri suggested that the slide decks and facilitator's guide include a scope and sequence and the research underpinning it.

Snow commented that CLIFTER fits in well with the ELA standards that incorporate cursive. CLIFTER explains the "why" behind teaching cursive. Datchuk added that the project team is still going through the research, but it seems like it is important for spelling and cursive to be taught together. Preliminary findings suggest there may be benefits for students with dyslexia as well. These potential benefits will appear in the module.

Next, the IRRC provided updates on the Measure FIRST project. This project examines fidelity of intervention, which is important because it helps us understand when a curriculum is working.

This project involves a systematic review. So far, over 4,500 abstracts have been screened, and coding is still underway. The team has released a preview of the findings, shedding light on what fidelity is and why it matters.

The IRRC will launch an eLearning module on fidelity and an associated application August 1. The app will be an online portal that any Iowa educator can access to create their own fidelity form. It will also provide tips for creating fidelity checklists. This app will allow the IRRC to engage in a back-and-forth continuous improvement process with educators.

Ahead of the full launch, the IRRC will release MOTR-cycle. Instead of the full suite of measurement tools, MOTR-cycle will focus on one dimension: opportunities to respond (OTRs). Datchuk has published an initial blog post on this topic, addressing what OTRs are and when they are used. Increasing OTRs has demonstrated improvements in several outcomes (e.g., academic engagement, increases in time on-task, decreases in disruptive behavior). A pace of three OTRs per minute may be enough to improve these outcomes, though this may differ depending on the modality of the response (e.g., oral or written). The MOTR calculator will be released June 18. The team has already demo-ed a draft version of the calculator.

Plourde asked who the intended user of the MOTR calculator will be. Datchuk responded that it would be an instructional coach, administrator, or anyone doing fidelity monitoring in the classroom. The project team is trying to account for educators' perceptions of fidelity monitoring, proactively addressing these concerns in blog posts. It is important that teachers do not feel that their job is on the line because of fidelity monitoring. Teachers may be concerned that their fidelity data will be reported to the DE. Plourde added that, whether or not the tool is intended to be evaluative, it may be perceived that way by teachers.

Regarding OTRs, Wymore questioned whether there was a difference between whole-group and individual OTRs. Datchuk responded that, according to research, group responses tended to result in higher gains for students. However, some studies showed a combination of group and individual responses performed higher than just group responses. Teachers should consider what format works best for the students, how students are expected to respond, and what is the optimal pace.

Steuri asked whether turn-and-talks count as OTRs. Datchuk acknowledged that they were; however, he added that corrective feedback and praise are important components of OTRs, and these are difficult to provide during turn-and-talks.

Steuri asked how the IRRC planned to expand the tool in the future. Datchuk replied that the IRRC is working with Dr. Seth King, a UI professor who works with behavior measurement, fidelity monitoring, and guidance. With King, the project team is looking into best practices for fidelity monitoring in both Tier 1 and Tier 2 settings, as well as differences between those settings.

The project team will prepopulate some sample fidelity forms; however, copyright laws restrict what information can be provided regarding specific curricula and instructional materials. Another way to expand CLIFTER would be to create a membership structure for districts using the tool. Each district would have a separate login for the tool. Then, if a district is using a specific curriculum, users could create a fidelity checklist for that curriculum and share it with others in their district. Additionally, this portal could allow for collaboration, as users could see forms developed by other users. This would also help the IRRC gather data regarding whether a particular core curriculum is working.

The Iowa Science of Reading Summit will take place July 29–30. Currently, 400 attendees have registered.

Speakers include Dr. Erica Lembke, who specializes in early writing skills; Dr. Tim Odegard, who focuses on dyslexia; and Dr. Tiffany Peltier, who is a NWEA research scientist specializing in teacher preparation.

Conference length is sufficient for one Iowa Licensure Renewal Unit (ILRU). The IRRC is hoping the DE will provide funding for attendees to receive these.

The summit will also include time for attendees to collaborate with others in their community of practice.

7. Future planning

Datchuk requested feedback from the advisory council to guide future IRRC work. The IRRC staff has been brainstorming future plans internally, discussing ideas during monthly meetings with the DE, gathering feedback through a survey of monthly email update subscribers, and talking with school partners (16 districts, 90 different schools) about what interests them.

One goal for the coming year is to continue focusing on a translational science approach. To avoid a research-to-practice gap, the team will work to have detailed dissemination plans, starting from the beginning of the project. The IRRC will work to increase alignment between research, dissemination, and technical assistance.

Regarding technical assistance, the IRRC is currently engaged in a significant amount of in-person support, but in the future, the center will focus on other modalities of services. This will help the IRRC build capacity to reach more districts. For new projects, the IRRC will offer eLearning modules, slide

decks with practice-based opportunities beyond module content, webinars, telehealth/office hours, and in-person technical assistance tailored to the local context.

Plourde commented on the telehealth/office hours modality. He said that Green Hills AEA had offered office hours in the past, and these were most successful when they were linked to something else, such as a curriculum meeting.

Steuri added that the IRRC used to offer train-the-trainer events. These could effectively be paired with telehealth/office hours.

Datchuk proposed offering an event in one part of the state and inviting area schools. Steuri responded that offering one time would be difficult for schools, as it can be a challenge to find overlapping availability. She proposed offering different time options, such as Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoon. Plourde agreed, adding that it is difficult to find release time for teachers to attend PD. Steuri added that offering events over Zoom could be a possible alternative, as this reduces teacher travel time. VanZuiden suggested considering asynchronous options.

Plourde concluded that train-the-trainer events with AEAs, coaches, administrators, and principals could be well-attended. These could involve regional sessions with follow-up telehealth/office hours. The events could be previewed and promoted during monthly superintendent and AEA meetings.

a. Project Sparks

Zimmermann provided some background on the SPARKS project.

For the research component, this project will expand on previous work conducted as part of the Caregiver Data Literacy project. The project team will develop and administer Spanish- and Arabic-language surveys to gain insight on caregivers' perceptions and knowledge of literacy in Iowa. It is important to collect data from multilingual families, particularly speakers of Spanish and Arabic, as these are among the top languages spoken in the state.

The project will include an eLearning module to help caregivers develop knowledge and skills on how to help their children build early literacy skills at home (e.g., how to pronounce phonemes in a blended way, how to provide corrective and affirmative feedback).

The project team will also create a booklet with activities that caregivers can do at home with their children to promote early literacy development. For example, the booklet can include materials like letter-sound cards with mnemonics. There will be accompanying videos demonstrating how to correctly pronounce the most common phoneme associated with each letter of the alphabet. Other videos will demonstrate caregivers implementing activities from the booklet.

There will be caregiver training opportunities, including two in-person training sessions with discussion and practice with module topics and two synchronous webinars for caregivers to discuss module content, practice skills, and build community online.

Steuri asked for clarification on the connection between the survey and the project. Zimmermann responded that the survey will help the IRRC understand what parents and caregivers want to learn more about, which will inform topics covered in eLearning and other family resources.

Plourde commented that early childhood supports and early access supports are two big concerns of Green Hills AEA in light of recent funding cuts. Currently, they are creating “centers for excellence” in each AEA, and one will be devoted to early access. This could be an excellent opportunity for collaboration.

Marra pointed out that caregivers are not always aware of the resources that are available. Collaboration between the IRRC and AEAs may help shore up this lack of awareness. She emphasized the importance of disseminating the tools widely. Other ideas were shared for dissemination, including presenting at the Iowa Association for Young Children Conference and developing a train-the-trainer module for pre-school teachers and individuals involved with homeschooling who can disseminate information to families.

b. Project RISE

The IRRC research team introduced Project RISE and explained the motivation behind the project. This project aims to identify high-leverage practices in PD and coaching and support work on the Iowa Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grant.

Through the project, the IRRC will provide support to instructional coaches involved in the grant through webinars, in-person PD, and telehealth/office hours.

Additionally, the research team will conduct a systematic review of previous research on literacy-focused PD and coaching. The project will also involve a case study with rural district partners about how educators perceive PD and change their instructional practices. The findings of this research will contribute to the development of eLearning on PD and coaching practices. Findings will also be published in peer-reviewed journals and on the IRRC blog.

Finally, the project will involve a program evaluation of CLSD grant initiatives by analyzing student outcomes.

The research team requested feedback from the advisory council regarding how the team will select schools for the case study.

c. Project MIRAGES

The research team provided an overview of the MIRAGES project, which aims to support the literacy development of adolescent readers in Iowa. Much of existing IRRC content is directed at early readers, though there is increasing interest in resources and guidance for adolescents.

A large number of secondary students have reading difficulties, and intervention alone is not sufficient to address the problem. Incorporating literacy into content areas in conjunction with intervention can accelerate literacy improvement. However, there is not much guidance for doing this in secondary

schools. Morphology instruction may be a way to address the literacy needs of secondary learners, as many secondary reading difficulties are related to morphology.

The research component of this project will examine the relationship between morphological ability and different reading outcomes. The findings will guide the development of targeted morphology interventions.

Dissemination of research findings will include an eLearning module for educators on how to implement literacy instruction across curricular areas. The module will include videos of teachers implementing morphology instruction. To accompany the module, there will be an app that will segment morphologically complex words. Teachers can identify content area vocabulary, and the app will identify the constituent morphemes that the word comprises. The IRRC will also create slide decks and facilitator guides for PD sessions that provide additional discussion and practice of strategies. Finally, findings will be disseminated through posts on the IRRC blog.

The technical assistance component of this project will include two in-person and two synchronous online PD sessions that will extend the discussion and practice of the module.

Plourde asked whether the videos in the module would be aligned with a particular approach to instruction, and Zimmermann responded that they would demonstrate explicit morphological instruction.

Steuri questioned where morphology fit in with various models of reading, such as Scarborough's Reading Rope. Zimmermann said that, although morphology was not identified as one of the five pillars of reading, it still plays an important role in literacy development.

Wymore expressed her excitement for the project, stating its applicability for all content areas, from math to PE.

Zimmermann recognized the work of Jason Kline in Cedar Rapids and everything he has done to leverage morphology instruction in content area classes.

Wymore asked how the IRRC could support teacher educators who are preparing future content area teachers. Steuri has a list of individuals who have led sessions on reading in content areas, and this would be a great place to look for potential collaborators.

d. Project CHRIS

This project will involve improvements and updates to existing LIFTER and CLIFTER resources. One goal of this project is to publish a paper version of LIFTER and CLIFTER. Secondly, the IRRC will research and develop spelling activities that can be added to both tools. Finally, the project will establish protocols and professional learning on how to administer, score, and interpret handwriting assessments.

Other handwriting supports may include facilitator guides; videos of teachers implementing LIFTER and CLIFTER; and webinars, telehealth/office hours, and in-person presentations to support implementation.

VanZuiden asked whether these resources will be free. Datchuk clarified that, per Iowa legislative priorities, everything the IRRC creates is free to Iowans, although it could be sold to out-of-state users.

e. Project TAPS/SOR

Through this project, the IRRC will provide no-cost, intermittent support to local education agencies (LEAs). This captures the work the center is currently doing through its data partnerships. The center receives a number of requests for emails, phone calls, Zoom meetings, and in-person visits, so this project ensures there is capacity to respond to those requests.

The IRRC has ongoing partnerships with nine LEAs in the coming year. These partnerships are ongoing because research suggests that 50 hours of PD is the minimum before it begins to have an impact on student outcomes.

Regarding the Iowa Science of Reading Summit, the IRRC is considering ways to adapt the conference to make sure that it is sustainable. One option is to partner with an outside vendor. Another option is to decrease the in-person size and add hybrid options for attendance. Another option is to shift to an online-only summit.

VanZuiden noted that Decoding Dyslexia does not plan to grow; the conference attendance is always capped at 250. She added that the Iowa Science of Reading Summit is helpful for reaching more people.

Steuri added that hosting the summit in the summer is important so that more educators are available and able to attend.

Datchuk noted that Iowa Code stipulates that the IRRC cannot charge for PD. There is great demand for the summit, but the revenue generated from the summit is not sufficient to cover free attendance for Iowa educators.

VanZuiden suggested offering the summit in person every other year. The goal would be to offer no-cost, intermittent support to LEAs upon request.

f. Project Super Mario

This project covers the IRRC's daily operations, including maintenance of online content, updating eLearning, and more.

In the coming year, the IRRC intends to create two online portals to support collaboration with partners. The first will be a research partner portal for researchers and data partners interested in collaborating with the IRRC. The second will be for AEA PD proposals. As part of new legislation, AEAs submit their trainings for review, and the first criterion is the evidence base. AEAs have reached out to the IRRC for help with the review process, and this portal would provide structure to process this type of request.

Other goals of this project include: creating facilitator guides for all new eLearning modules; updating at least three publications with new evidence; maintaining current website offerings, modules, and apps; advising on boards and committees; providing support to caregivers and schools; and disseminating research findings.

Datchuk asked advisory council members to complete a Qualtrics survey with their feedback and rankings of projects by the end of the coming Friday.

8. Overview of metrics to date for the IRRC

Datchuk reviewed the current data related to the efforts of the IRRC so far this year. Some highlights include: submitting four grant applications, publishing two articles, providing professional development and technical assistance to 2,500 Iowa educators, recording over 9,000 eLearning module completions this year, recording over 38,000 Dyslexia Overview module completions since its conception, and recording over 388,000 visits to the IRRC website.

9. Overview of budget and accounts for the IRRC

Datchuk reviewed the current IRRC budget expenditures and shared the need per UI to build up at least one year of operational costs in the center's required reserves through revenue generation outside of the state appropriation.

10. Adjourn

On a movement by Stanley, seconded by Plourde, the meeting adjourned.