

Iowa Reading Research Center Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

January 14, 2026

9:00 a.m.–11:30 a.m.

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

Members Present: Cassie Ascheman, English Language Arts Specialist, Bergman Academy; April Gosselink-Lemke, Elementary Literacy Consultant, Iowa Department of Education; Wanda Steuri, Dyslexia and Science of Reading Consultant, Iowa Department of Education; Papae Wymore, Lecturer of Education, Central College; Rhonda Nelson, Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Coordinator, Bettendorf Community School District; Kim Buryanek, Superintendent, Denison Community School District; Jason Plourde, Chief Administrator, Green Hills Area Education Agency; Cori Stanley, Instructional Coach, Indianola Community School District; Tina Wahlert, Division Administrator, Iowa Department of Education; Gwen Marra, Professor of Education, Dordt University; Mindy VanZuiden (chair), President, Decoding Dyslexia

Additional Attendees: John Speer, Interim Director, Iowa Reading Research Center; Keller Young, Assistant Research Scientist, Iowa Reading Research Center; Leah Zimmermann, Assistant Director, Iowa Reading Research Center; Nikki Bodey, Associate Director of Operations and Project Management, Iowa Reading Research Center

1. Call to order

The meeting was called to order at 9:28 a.m.

2. Approval of October 2025 meeting minutes

The advisory council moved to adjust the October 2025 meeting minutes to correct Kim Buryanek's title as superintendent. Pending the revision, on a motion by Cori Stanley, seconded by Cassie Ascheman, the October 2025 meeting minutes were approved.

3. Public comments

No public comments

4. Updates from the Iowa Department of Education

April Gosselink-Lemke provided updates from the Iowa Department of Education (DE) literacy team. Currently, there are 165 districts in Iowa using Amira Reading Assistant. Including 26 non-public schools, there are over 75,000 students using the program. In comparison to last year at this same time, there are substantially more districts and students using the program. There will be several updates to the Amira Reading Assistant soon, and the literacy team will present about the changes at the February Curriculum Network meeting. The EPS team is currently collecting data to determine the impact of the program.

The literacy team will present to the Council of Chief State School Officers to share what they have been working on over the past two years, including updated standards, the Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan (CLSP), the Comprehensive State Literacy Development (CLSD) grant, implementation of various statewide initiatives, LETRS, the dyslexia handbook, and Amira.

Several members of the literacy team have completed the third round of Area Educational Agency (AEA) review. This has involved reviewing and identifying strengths and areas for improvement; ensuring adherence to Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) tiers; and confirming all practices are evidence-based. This review should be completed by February 1.

The team has been working on an Iowa Academic Standards Family Guide, which aims to help caregivers understand what students are expected to learn by the end of each academic year in all subjects, as well as practical ways parents can support students. It can be found on the DE website.

Wanda Steuri shared that the literacy team is planning to present at the Decoding Dyslexia Iowa Educator Conference. They plan to discuss the CSLP, its organization, and tools that are available to stakeholders at the event.

Steuri provided dyslexia updates. She shared that many AEAs already have a dyslexia overview course approved by the DE, and they are continuing to develop a course on reading acquisition that will elaborate on different models of reading and the different components that support children's literacy development.

Steuri added that House File 890 passed last year, and this bill includes a provision to provide stipends to individuals who obtained a dyslexia specialist endorsement (DSE). Those who have already obtained the DSE are encouraged to apply for a stipend as a "thank you" for receiving it. By spring, the DE expects to have a system in place so that DSE recipients can apply for the stipend.

The DE is partnering with SchoolKit and Watershed to provide High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) training through the three-year HQIM Leadership Academy. It is required for certain schools, like Comprehensive School Improvement (CSI), Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Levels 2 and 3, and CSLD schools. However, the goal is to have every district in the state join by the end of the three-year period. Cohort 2 will begin in the fall.

Round 7 has closed for LETRS. Four district cohorts, totaling 120 participants, joined the last cohort. There were 35 new administrator participants and 150 public educators and early educators. Of the funds set aside for public educators, 97% were used this round. Of the funds dedicated to administrators,

57% were used. Over 400 individuals who joined at the start of the program will complete the training by the end of January. Tina Wahlert added that the 300 remaining licenses will be lost if not used, so it is important for educators to sign up now. The DE will continue to support LETRS again next year on a limited basis.

5. Updates from the Iowa Reading Research Center

John Speer reviewed the Iowa Reading Research Center (IRRC) code, sharing the role of the IRRC and advisory council and describing the center's relationship to the DE.

Handwriting

Keller Young provided updates on the handwriting project. In September, the IRRC released assessment materials that accompany the print handwriting materials. These are curriculum-based measures—short, formative assessments used to track students' progress with their handwriting fluency. This information can help teachers make data-informed decisions on handwriting supports. The center also released videos demonstrating the administration of the assessments. These videos can be found in the professional development (PD) toolkit, which is a Canvas course that includes everything an educator would need to lead a handwriting PD session in your district. The toolkit includes PowerPoints, handouts, and formative knowledge-check questions.

Rhonda Nelson asked whether the IRRC has assessments for both print and cursive. Young responded that, while the center does have a PD toolkit for both print and cursive, there is little research on cursive assessment, so it is something that needs to be studied further.

Young continued that the research team is collecting primary data in Iowa schools this spring to receive feedback from teachers and students on the materials.

The project team is also planning to create complementary spelling activities that integrate spelling and handwriting. This will expand existing handwriting materials that only focus on letters in isolation.

Additionally, the center will release a report on its findings from the systematic review on cursive handwriting instruction.

Furthermore, this summer, the center will release printable handwriting booklets. The research team is piloting the booklet with districts in the spring, and any data gathered will be used to make revisions.

Nelson asked how educators should organize handwriting instruction. Young responded that the IRRC recommends ordering letter instruction based on stroke, but added that the order is customizable online so that it aligns with the curriculum teachers are using.

Gwen Marra asked how sound would be incorporated into the new spelling materials. Young responded that it will be important to have sound in the spelling program in order to emphasize the letter-sound connections.

Steuri expressed concern that the stroke-based sequence and the phonetic sequence will not align. Young agreed and underscored the importance of the customizable sequence.

Steuri asked how the spelling materials will work when incorporating the stroke-based sequence. Young responded that it would be ideal for teachers to be able to select the letters they are teaching, and the application will identify words containing those letters.

Gosselink-Lemke asked whether the IRRC is considering creating a digital version of the spelling materials, as that will save schools printing costs. Ascheman added that it could be helpful to have QR codes for each letter that educators can share with students' caregivers. Young thanked everyone for their feedback and ideas.

HQIM

Young shared updates on the HQIM project. The IRRC released new explicit instruction fidelity monitoring materials in December. This includes an eLearning module on monitoring fidelity of implementation of explicit instruction practices, including tips on how to conduct observations and how to provide feedback and coaching. The module includes videos of teachers modeling each step. The module also includes a rubric on monitoring explicit instruction practices that is grounded in research. The Measure FIRST application will also include a built-in rubric for monitoring explicit instruction practices.

Young reminded the council of the IRRC's existing fidelity materials, including the Foundations of Fidelity eLearning module, the Measure FIRST application, and the Foundations of Fidelity PD Toolkit.

Soon, the research team will share a survey with Iowa schools to collect data on what fidelity monitoring and HQIM look like on their campuses. The center will produce two research articles and one research report highlighting the findings of this study.

Steuri and Gosselink-Lembke asked for more information on the survey. Young replied that it really aims to focus on fidelity knowledge and practice: How does knowledge impact practice? And where are opportunities for the IRRC to provide support?

Nelson asked how the IRRC's fidelity tools address dosage and quality. Young responded that it was a good question, and that the answer was complicated. The systematic review revealed that the variation of fidelity monitoring practices in schools was substantial. There is a gap between what research recommends and what is feasible in school.

Buryanek added that the DE has a list of HQIM, and schools have similar lists. She asked about the relationship between HQIM and fidelity. She would be interested in seeing the link between certain HQIM and fidelity. Young responded that the pre-built rubrics in the Measure FIRST tool will be limited to instructional practices grounded in research. However, users are able to create their own rubrics based on the materials they are using.

Gosselink-Lemke added that survey responses will be self-reported, so she wonders how accurate the responses will be.

Wahlert added that one requirement of the DE's HQIM grant is for leadership from districts to conduct classroom observations and identify which HQIM schools are using. Nelson added that these

observations will be an important opportunity to collect data on implementation, as often schools still rely on anecdotal evidence alone. She underscored the importance of bridging conversations between teachers and administrators so that everyone is on the same page.

Middle-school morphology

Leah Zimmermann provided updates regarding the middle-school morphology project. The project team has drafted an eLearning module on effective morphology instruction practices. The team will share a draft with the DE next week for feedback. The first lesson covers foundational concepts in morphology. Lessons 2–4 teach users different evidence-based morphology instruction strategies, such as using morphemes to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words. The project team filmed modeling videos yesterday. The team also developed student materials, including graphic organizers and a printable set of morpheme cards.

Additionally, the project team has been creating an online tool for teaching morphology. The team built a database of 4,000 morphologically complex words used in different subject areas. The center's application developer is currently creating an online tool in which users can enter a morphologically complex word, and the tool will break down the word into its constituent morphemes. Then, users can click on the morphemes to see other words that contain them.

The project team is creating a Morpheme Lab that will contain these and other morphology resources, including blog posts, a PD toolkit, observation forms, and lists of the most common morphemes and words containing those morphemes for different subject areas.

Nelson asked whether teachers will be able to choose their own scope and sequence, and Zimmermann clarified that the resources do not constitute a morphology curriculum.

Nelson added that it would be useful to identify high-utility morphemes across subject areas (e.g., both English language arts and science). Zimmermann agreed and said it could be helpful to identify which words appear across multiple lists.

Ascherman asked whether the application will show the pronunciation of morphemes and words. Zimmermann agreed that this could be a useful addition.

Papae Wymore emphasized the importance of these materials for secondary students, a group for whom literacy supports are often lacking.

Nelson asked whether the IRRC team could include guidance on the morphology routine from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Practice Guide. Zimmermann responded that, although that routine does not appear in the module, it does appear in some of the IRRC's PD.

6. 10-minute break

7. Updates from the Iowa Reading Research Center continued

Caregiver supports

Zimmermann shared updates on the center's caregiver resources. The focus of this project is to help caregivers support the development of their preschool children's code-focused skills, such as phonemic awareness.

So far, the project team has drafted a set of mnemonic alphabet cards. In making the cards, it has been important to balance preserving the shape of the letter and representing a recognizable image of a key word that begins with that sound.

The team has also outlined a new module for the Caregivers Resource Hub. The module will include the following lessons: why pre-literacy skills are important, literacy instruction 101, and activities that caregivers can do to support their children's letter-sound knowledge.

The project team will also create a child-focused tool. Using this tool, the child will click on an image to see a video of a person pronouncing the word depicted in the image. These videos also can serve as a useful model for caregivers.

Additionally, the team is creating a printable activity booklet containing 10 activities to spark early literacy. The booklet will include links to videos of caregivers modeling each activity. One activity will include a simple game and game board. These tools will be released in late May. Ascherman asked whether any of the words depicted in the mnemonic cards rhymed, and she suggested an activity to develop phonemic awareness in which children think of rhymes using the cards.

Summit

The Iowa Science of Reading Summit will take place this summer on June 16–17. There will be four keynote and featured speakers. There will be early registration for CSI schools. Wahlert would like to offer priority registration to CLSD schools as well. Speer requested lists and contacts of individuals at those schools.

8. Future planning

Speer shared how the IRRRC has developed priorities for the future. The center has solicited feedback from numerous stakeholders, including the advisory council. IRRRC staff reflected on this feedback during a staff retreat. Based on this reflection, the team has consolidated the center's work around three priorities: (1) technical assistance and PD, (2) maintenance and enhancement, and (3) innovation and development. Compared to previous years, there will be fewer projects in the innovation and development category as the center prioritizes technical assistance and professional development and maintenance and enhancement.

Technical assistance and professional development

One main goal of the center is science-of-reading implementation, in which the center provides professional development to support districts in implementing evidence-based practices.

Jason Plourde asked whether we should say "science of literacy" rather than "science of reading." He also asked how writing fits into LETRS training. Wahlert also shared the concerns she is hearing from

STEM educators, as many are concerned about AI in writing and ensuring that students have foundational skills. Zimmermann responded that, based on the requests the center is receiving, people want to know how to use writing as a tool for instruction and formative assessment, adding that we know that reading, writing, and oral language are interconnected. Nelson added that her high school tackled language and reading across all subjects. They are using Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) in their K–5 classrooms, and it has been going well. She added that Michelle Hass has a new curriculum-based measure (CBM) book coming out which addresses writing.

Maintenance and enhancement

Speer said that research evolves, and that, although IRRC content is not obsolete, much could benefit from updating. Many of the updates and revisions will be related to dyslexia. Specifically, the center plans to review and revisit the Dyslexia Overview module and the Understanding and Observing the Skills Associated With Dyslexia module. Steuri asked how the IRRC could work together with the DE and the Dyslexia Task Force to fulfill the recommendation on professional learning related to dyslexia. Zimmermann responded that one way to support this goal is for the IRRC to improve modules by adding recommendations for differentiation to address the diverse needs of learners in classrooms.

Innovation and design

Based on feedback received from stakeholders, there is interest in writing and assessment. Plourde added that he is interested in formative writing, progress monitoring, quick writing assessments, and writing to learn, especially for students with special needs. Nelson asked whether the IRRC could work on a CBM that was easier to score. Buryanek added that it is important to define the goal—text-based instruction is different from handwriting.

Nikki Bodey led an activity in which advisory council members partnered in groups of two and discussed the IRRC's priorities—what they liked about the center's plans, and what they thought the center should focus more on.

Mindy VanZuiden asked about the center's plans to update and improve dyslexia content. She questioned whether the IRRC had experts to lead these efforts, and whether the center plans to collaborate with the DE, the Dyslexia Task Force, Decoding Dyslexia Iowa (DDIA), and dyslexia specialists across Iowa. Speer responded that he was open to and interested in collaborating with others.

9. Adjourn

On a motion by Steuri, seconded by Buryanek, the meeting adjourned at 11:30 a.m.