

Iowa Reading Research Center (IRRC) Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

October 8, 2025

12:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.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; Stacey Cole, School District Superintendent, Storm Lake Community School District; Kim Buryanek, Superintendent, Denison Community School District; Erick Pruitt, School District Superintendent, Ankeny Community School District; Mindy VanZuiden (Chair), President, Decoding Dyslexia Iowa; Gwen Marra, Professor of Education, Dordt University

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

1. Call to order

The meeting was called to order at 12:04 p.m.

2. Approval of agenda

On a motion by Erick Pruitt, seconded by Gwen Marra, the agenda for the meeting was approved with zero “no” votes.

3. Approval of April 2025 meeting minutes

On a motion by Pruitt, seconded by Stacey Cole, the April 2025 meeting minutes were approved with zero “no” votes.

4. Updates from the Iowa Department of Education

The literacy team shared updates from the Iowa Department of Education (DE). Registration for round 7 of LETRS is open through January 2026, and the round begins in February 2026. The literacy team will present at Decoding Dyslexia Iowa (DDIA) Educator Conference later this month, sharing updates. Wanda Steuri will present on the Iowa Dyslexia Handbook.

5. Public comments

No public comments

6. Election of new vice chair

Nominations for a new vice chair were opened. Steuri nominated Pruitt. Mindy VanZuiden moved, and Cole seconded. A roll call vote was taken with unanimous approval.

7. Updates on IRRIC Projects From Past Scope of Work

Shawn Datchuk provided updates on projects from the previous scope of work.

a. Cursive handwriting (CLIFTER)

The center is currently wrapping up a systematic review of cursive handwriting, along with a cursive handwriting application, an eLearning module, and a professional development (PD) toolkit with scripted slide decks. So far, 250 educators have attended cursive handwriting trainings. Des Moines Public Schools are currently using IRRIC-developed print and cursive handwriting curricula.

b. Fidelity of implementation (Measure FIRST)

The center is currently conducting a systematic review related to fidelity of implementation that involves the creation of a collaborative form for district-wide evaluation. This form will support schools in data-based decision-making. The center has also created an eLearning module on the foundations of fidelity, as well as blog posts and webinars on the topic. Currently, the Great Prairie Area Education Agency (AEA) is using the collaborative form to help with coaching in their schools and districts.

Pruitt asked how these fidelity resources are being disseminated to districts. Datchuk responded that IRRIC technical assistance providers are visiting schools, and the IRRIC communications team has promoted the materials through targeted emails, the website, and social media. Additionally, an IRRIC staff member with a shared role in the Great Prairie AEA has helped with promotion efforts. Pruitt suggested building a ListServ of superintendents and academic officers to help with dissemination of these resources, and Cole added that these resources could be discussed at monthly superintendent meetings. Pruitt recommended creating a one-pager as well. Datchuk added that the center is looking for ways to collaborate more with AEAs. Cole added that the Heartland AEA would be a great place to share these resources.

c. Data-based decision-making (Core DBDM)

Many educators have questions regarding when and how to make instructional changes based on data. Instructional coaches are interested in understanding how to assess the overall health of core instruction. The IRRC has created an application called the Tier 1.5 Calculator in which users input screener data and receive guidance based on research. The University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) is partnering with the IRRC on a webinar on this topic in November.

VanZuiden asked whether the Tier 1.5 Calculator helps identify problems in Tier 1 instruction, and whether it guides educators through next steps. Datchuk responded that the center is still building that out. Currently, the calculator indicates the health of Tier 1 in relation to several research-based decision points, and whether classwide intervention could be beneficial.

VanZuiden asked whether there was any guidance for selecting core curriculum. Datchuk responded that guidance regarding core curriculum did not currently exist, as the science of reading movement was moving faster than the research; however, he indicated that he would be interested in seeing or collecting data regarding the effects of specific curricula.

Pruitt expressed concern that education trends tend to fall in and out of favor, and he questioned how to protect research and prevent it from being swept up in education trends. Datchuk replied that he shared that concern: Educators need guidance and resources, yet the research is not currently sufficient to make recommendations on instructional materials. Tina Walpert added that, although many elementary schools are currently using high-quality curriculum, this is not yet the case in junior and senior high schools. Cole remarked on the cost of high-quality curriculum. Pruitt added that districts and schools focus heavily on selecting the right curriculum, and that same level of focus should be paid toward developing teachers' skills. Steuri added that no curriculum is comprehensive, and that a classwide intervention indicates where the curriculum gaps are. She emphasized the importance of supporting schools in identifying curriculum gaps and supplements to address those gaps.

d. Science of reading practice assessment (RIK)

Leah Zimmermann shared details regarding the center's new science of reading practice assessment, hosted through UI Learn. The assessment is not only for evaluation but also for knowledge building. Each of the nine modules concludes with a quiz and feedback that can help the user identify areas for growth. The Ames Community School District is having teachers take the assessment as preparation for PD this year. SUNY is conducting a study and using the assessment as an outcome measure for their research.

Marra asked how closely the assessment aligns with the Foundations of Reading assessment. Zimmermann replied that there is a crosswalk of the modules and the sections of the assessment within the module. Datchuk added that he would be interested in collecting data on the extent to which the scores on the practice assessment predict students' scores on the Foundations of Reading assessment. Zimmermann added that she teaches a course on dyslexia interventions for reading teachers, and this assessment has been useful as a formative assessment to help identify which topics to focus on in the course.

Steuri asked whether the assessment provided explanations for incorrect answers. Zimmermann replied that it currently does not, although the explanations of the correct responses are quite thorough. This could be a potential enhancement for future iterations of the assessment.

e. Caregiver data literacy

Zimmermann shared that the center is wrapping up the two research projects related to caregiver data literacy. Last spring, the center distributed a survey on caregiver knowledge. Initial data analysis is complete, and a report about caregivers' knowledge and perceptions will be released in December. Additionally, the center conducted a systematic review of legislation regarding personalized reading plans (PRPs). So far, it seems that about half of states have legislation regarding PRPs. The center will present findings at the Conference on Learning Disabilities in October, and a research report will be released in December.

Early last year, the center released an eLearning module called "Understanding Your Student's Data Literacy." The module explains different kinds of assessments and their purposes, provides guidance for interpreting scores, and includes discussion questions to help structure conversations between caregivers and educators. Additionally, the center created the Educator Letter Builder, which is a tool educators can use to help communicate students' assessment results to their caregivers. There will be a PD toolkit coming out tomorrow. Additionally, there will be a webinar on this topic tomorrow, and it will be the center's first webinar geared towards parents and caregivers. Several schools have shared webinar details through e-backpacks. Datchuk added that the caregiver survey helps the center gather data on what caregivers know, what they would like to learn, and how they would like to learn about it. The center will share a draft of the survey with the DE before its release.

8. IRRC legislation

Datchuk highlighted the unique role of the IRRC, being housed at the University of Iowa and written into Iowa law. According to Iowa Code, the center must work in collaboration with the DE and Area Education Agencies (AEAs), and the center's services must be free for Iowans. There are some challenges with fulfilling the legislative requirements, especially as new legislation has been enacted. For example, there is interest in working with institutes of higher education to support literacy efforts, but this would be outside the scope of the center's legislative priorities. Another example is the restructuring that has taken place in AEAs: The "pay-for-service" model adopted by AEAs now puts IRRC-provided technical assistance in direct competition with AEA-provided technical assistance. This competition complicates collaboration between the IRRC and AEAs.

Focus on different legislative priorities has shifted over time. For example, in the past, the primary focus was on research (e.g., projects in Council Bluffs, summer reading program research project). The scope of work was very short and undetailed, and it was unclear whether all priorities were addressed. In contrast, during the interim director period, the scope of work was longer and more detailed. The center conducted no research, and there was an increased focus on Priority 1, no-cost PD. This emphasis helped create robust networks and spread the science of reading. However, on-demand, customized presentations were not sustainable and did not allow time for research. As no student data was collected, the center was not able to measure the efficacy of its work or understand whether it was impacting student learning outcomes. Currently, the center has its most detailed scope of work,

including specific deliverables and their alignment to priorities, specific dollar amounts assigned to each item, and research and development built in. The center develops specific tools and resources, demonstrates them, tests them out, and changes them based on feedback. This iterative process has been cost-efficient for Iowa. For example, the IRRC's free print and cursive handwriting curricula saved schools thousands of dollars in Des Moines alone. In addition, the center continues to develop its products as more feedback is gathered. The center also provides free PD for AEAs on its tools, as the AEAs have the footprint and staffing to effectively disseminate the knowledge to teachers.

Pruitt and Steuri both asked how the IRRC would respond if funding continued to be removed from AEAs. Zimmermann responded that it is important for the IRRC to create materials that anyone can use. Additionally, the center can focus on hosting webinars where instructional coaches can access materials and gain knowledge on how to implement the materials.

9. Current IRRC Projects

Datchuk outlined the IRRC's current contracts. First, the IRRC has a research contract with United Ways of Iowa for \$15,000. Second, the center recently was awarded a \$1.2 million grant for a project called I-CORE, which will fund educators and other school-based personnel to receive training in applied behavioral therapy. The IRRC will provide training in the science of reading, structured literacy, and behavioral techniques, as there is a relationship between reading difficulties and behavior challenges. Third, the IRRC has its \$1.5 million contract with the DE.

In the latest scope of work with the DE, one goal was spacing out major product releases throughout the year. For example, the center recently released handwriting assessments; later this fall, the center will release a fidelity form and eLearning module on observing explicit instruction practices; in March, the center will release a morphology application; and in May, the center will release pre-K reading supports. All major releases will have a PD toolkit and webinar.

a. Handwriting and Spelling Connection

Keller Young shared updates regarding the center's work on handwriting and spelling. The project team continues to grow and improve the LIFTER and CLIFTER curricula. The team is currently developing paper-bound curricula. Protocols and printables for handwriting assessments have already been created, and the team is planning to develop spelling activities to accompany the handwriting materials. The center will also continue to provide online and in-person support for its handwriting resources. April Gosselink-Lemke asked for more details on the paper-bound curriculum. Datchuk replied that a paper-bound version would be needed in order to conduct research. A present concern is the cost of the books, which would be \$50 per student. The center is currently working with UI Printing to explore different printing options in order to reduce costs. The research team plans to conduct a pilot study with the printed curricula in the spring, receive feedback from educators, make updates, and release it more widely at a later date. VanZuiden asked whether the center could share a zip file of the resources in the meantime. Datchuk responded that it would not be ideal to use the curriculum without video or sounds. Cassie Ascheman asked where to find the explanation behind the systematic order of letters in LIFTER and CLIFTER, and Young said that the explanation could be found within the eLearning module. She added that there is also an option for teachers to select their own order of letters. Marra added that she

had her undergraduate students take the LIFTER and CLIFTER eLearning modules, and she appreciated how the modules explained the research behind instructional practices.

b. High-Quality Instructional Supports

Young shared updates on the center's research on high-quality instructional supports. The project team will have drafts of the survey to share in a few weeks, and the team is looking for expertise and feedback on the survey plan before dissemination. This survey aims to gather information regarding fidelity practices in schools (i.e., practices, knowledge, and perceptions of fidelity). The data will help us create PD and resources to support educators in providing high-fidelity instruction. Kim Buryanek suggested creating pre-built fidelity forms based on the DE's list of high-quality materials. Datchuk responded that he would be interested in researching fidelity forms for different curricula, adding that, currently, only CKLA has published research studies. Thus, if the center created pre-built fidelity forms, CLKA would be a good place to start. Otherwise, because there is currently no research supporting other curricula and associated fidelity protocols, if the center created fidelity forms based on other curricula, it could potentially be misleading to teachers. Datchuk added that the publication of curricula is currently outpacing research. Steuri suggested creating pre-built fidelity forms based on high-quality instructional strategies in general, rather than a strategy specific to a curriculum. Young replied that the center is working on that right now, creating fidelity forms for explicit instruction. Steuri responded that explicit instruction is quite broad, and the center might consider something more narrow, such as close reading. Cole said that the majority of her teachers have taught for three years or less. They don't know what to look for in a curriculum, yet they are more aligned to a specific curriculum rather than the findings of the science of reading more broadly. She added that many new teachers are particularly anxious about fidelity observations. She suggested avoiding the term "fidelity," instead framing this project around "integrity to the science of reading" rather than "fidelity to a curriculum."

c. Morphology (MIRAGES)

The research team provided updates on the morphology instruction meta-analysis, which examines all studies on how students use morphemes in reading and how morphology knowledge relates to reading outcomes. Currently, the team is coding studies to determine the average effect of outcomes. The project team is drafting an eLearning module on morphology with four lessons to build teachers' knowledge of key morphology concepts and strategies for teaching morphology. Additionally, the team is creating an application to break down multimorphemic words into component morphemes. While intended for teachers, this application could also be used by teachers. Currently, the team has a list of 4,000 multimorphemic words for the application. The team is building in different examples from different content areas.

d. Caregiver Supports

Zimmermann provided updates regarding the IRRIC's caregiver data literacy project. The first part of this project involves collecting data from multilingual families, replicating the IRRIC's caregiver data literacy survey from last year. Next, the project team is developing different resources for caregivers to use at home. Currently, most caregiver-oriented resources are focused on language comprehension rather than precursor skills. The team will create a downloadable booklet of activities, including videos of implementation and a short module to explain activities to caregivers. Caregiver resources will include

an application with embedded mnemonic cards. The team will also create a PD toolkit to provide training for parents and caregivers. The team chose these areas of focus based on data collected from the initial survey. Cole added that children watch a lot of YouTube Shorts, and she wondered if the center could use YouTube Shorts as a way to reach children and, in turn, their caregivers. Ascherman requested resources for teaching blends, adding that this could be a focus of future iterations.

e. 2026 Iowa Science of Reading Summit

Datchuk provided updates on planning from the 2026 Iowa Science of Reading Summit. The planning team has secured featured speakers and a keynote. The 2026 summit will remain in Cedar Rapids, as the center's existing relationship with the venue helps lower costs.

10. Collaborative priority setting

Zimmermann outlined the purpose behind our collaborative goal setting. The center aims to improve outcomes for PK–12 students, and research is critical to this aim. Research is necessary in order to understand what works and for whom and under what conditions. Research can shed light on ways we can improve our current resources. It supports informed allocation of precious resources to policy and practice. The center practices translational science. In other research models, researchers tell practitioners what to do; this one-way dissemination leads to a research-to-practice gap. Instead, the IRRC wants practitioners and researchers to work together by using lessons from evidence and practice. Data from both sides is needed to be able to determine what will help improve student outcomes.

Nikki Bodey shared the center's collaborative priority setting plan. Center staff will ask advisory council members to identify the top 3–5 priorities for IRRC work following the meeting. The center will seek feedback from other stakeholders as well. At the January meeting, center staff will present proposals for future work based on feedback. Center staff will use a rubric to assist in the process. Buryanek noted that this process could be difficult as all stakeholders come from different areas and have different priorities. She asked whether there is a specific measure we should focus on (e.g., ISASP scores, FastBridge scores). Zimmermann said that staff at the center will try to group priorities after receiving input from all stakeholders. Tina Walpert said that reducing the gap for special education is the biggest priority. Datchuk emphasized that, at this stage, the goal is to understand the diverse priorities of all stakeholders rather than narrowing down on a single priority.

11. Adjourn

On a motion by Pruitt, seconded by Buryanek, the meeting adjourned at 3:00 p.m.