

Iowa Reading Research Center Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

April 29, 2026

9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

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

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

Additional Attendees: Nikki Bodey, Associate Director of Operations and Project Management, Iowa Reading Research Center; Brad Niebling, Assistant Director of Technical Assistance and Professional Development, Iowa Reading Research Center; John Speer, Interim Director, Iowa Reading Research Center; Tom Wood, Learning Strategies and Supports Bureau Chief, Iowa Department of Education; Keller Young, Assistant Research Scientist, Iowa Reading Research Center; Leah Zimmermann, Assistant Director of Research, Iowa Reading Research Center

1. Call to order

The meeting was called to order at 9:00 a.m.

2. Approval of January 2026 meeting minutes

The advisory council moved to adjust the January 2026 meeting minutes. Rhonda Nelson shared that the author of the book she recommended is Michelle Hosp. Pending this revision, on a motion by Mindy VanZuiden, the January 2026 meeting minutes were approved at 9:02 a.m.

3. Approval of the April 2026 agenda

The advisory council approved the April 2026 agenda at 9:02 a.m.

4. Public comments

No public comments

5. Updates from the Iowa Department of Education

a. Comprehensive State Literacy Development (CLSD) grant

Representatives from the Iowa Department of Education (DE) shared updates on the Comprehensive State Literacy Development (CLSD) grant. DE consultants and Brad Niebling have been supporting districts with site visits. Twenty-eight districts and 102 schools are involved in the grant. Those involved are looking to strengthen relationships, improve communications, and share high-quality instructional materials (HQIM). The Iowa Reading Research Center (IRRC) is providing support at the state level to shed light on what is happening in schools as data collection begins. Some schools are participating in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), CLSD, and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act – Differential Accountability (IDEA-DA). As their schools fall under multiple categories, leaders at these schools are looking for assistance with alignment of priorities. Thus, there are currently three subgroups working on CLSD: the assessment team, the alignment team, and the on-site visit team.

b. Iowa Comprehensive Statewide Literacy Plan

The DE literacy team presented at the state library's youth services conference, Pop YS Con. They spoke about the state literacy plan and ways to support literacy development from birth to age 18. They shared the districts involved in CLSD and discussed the valuable role communities play in supporting children's literacy development. Librarians in attendance expressed interest in partnering with DE literacy consultants.

c. Amira

As of last week, 211 districts and over 100,000 students were using Amira—an AI-based instructional tool developed by EPS Learning. Students have read over one million stories, and over five million minutes have been logged on the program. The DE is interested in how Amira's use is affecting statewide assessments (e.g., FastBridge). Districts using Amira will report data using a new data collection tool from the state, as the DE does not have access to EPS data. They conducted a webinar about the data collection tool the week prior, and they will host another one in the following week. Data analysis will involve comparing beginning-of-year statewide assessment scores to end-of-year scores, as well as looking at national ranking data, in order to determine whether Amira is helping to close achievement gaps. They intend to look at its effects on specific student groups, such as multilingual learners, students receiving free and reduced lunch, and third-graders. They will also examine its effects on those using it with and without fidelity. They plan to share their findings in late summer or early fall.

Nelson asked whether Amira would be offered through December. April Gosselink-Lemke confirmed that their contract with Amira would continue through December and possibly beyond, though details of an extension are not yet determined. They have invested over five million dollars in Amira so far. She added that students who were identified as not proficient in reading and who used the tool with fidelity saw an average of 0.6 years of growth from December through May last year.

d. Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS)

Wanda Steuri provided updates on LETRS training. Nearly 6,200 educators have participated. Those who signed up in Rounds 1 and 2 have completed the training (approximately 1,500 educators so far). Registration is currently open for 400 licenses beginning in August. Registration includes all geographic regions of Iowa. Participants take a pretest at the beginning of the first year of the program, with an average initial score of 62%. Post-test scores at the end of Year 1 averaged 90%. They observed similar improvement in Year 2, from 69% at pretest to 90% at posttest. The DE recently released new professional learning community (PLC) guides, which were created by Steuri and based on a North Carolina model. These guides can be shared with anyone currently in the LETRS program.

e. Plain Talk

Leigh Belville, Darcy Kress, and Steuri attended Plain Talk this year. There were three keynotes, one of whom was Karen Mapp. She has written books about ways to extend and deepen community and school partnerships. Another speaker, Michael Bonner, spoke of his experiences teaching in low-SES districts and his strategies for preparing students for success. Adolescent literacy was a major focus of the conference. Keys to Literacy is doing an online professional development (PD) session on this topic, and the DE literacy team will watch this as well.

f. Dyslexia Specialist Endorsement (DSE) stipend

Steuri shared that HF 890 allows recipients of the dyslexia specialist endorsement to receive a stipend. The amount will be prorated, and depending on the amount of funds available and the time at which the request is made, the value of the stipend might change. This stipend will be part of the Iowa grants system. Those eligible can create an account in the Iowa grants system, which will walk them through the application process. A headline story about the grant will come out on May 1. The application will be open through June 30.

g. Foundations of Teaching Reading (FORT)

Miriam Able and the team reviewing teacher preparation programs have reviewed results from the FORT. It is important to note that the first testing window only included January through August—not the full year. Able's team hoped to see an average pass rate, though they were disappointed with the scores. It appears as though some candidates did not take the test seriously. They are considering whether to include the assessment as a graduation requirement in teacher education programs, although schools cannot require students to retake the test. Other states that have adopted the FORT have a pass rate of approximately 80%, although this rate includes retakes. They plan to work on a support plan with the DE and the Iowa Association for Teacher Education Certification (IACTE) to help schools self-study their curriculum and revise it if needed. Some schools submitted their self-study to Able's team, which collaborated with the schools to develop support plans based on FORT data. They broke down the institutions into three groups: intensive (below the state average of 35%), targeted (between 35–46%), and standard (above 46%). They created a reflection tool for programs, including a template that displays how they performed based on the statewide average and specific areas for improvement. The intensive

group, which includes five schools, was asked to complete data analysis and a data reflection tool. These schools require a remediation plan before students are able to graduate.

Kim Buryanek asked whether schools were charging for students to take a course to prepare them for the FORT. Able responded that it varies, although schools that require students to take a course to prepare them for the FORT are seeing a greater likelihood of candidates passing the assessment.

Cassie Aschman asked which year students are taking the exam. Able responded that each school decides which year they recommend taking it.

Nelson asked whether students receive detailed feedback on how they performed on each section, and Able confirmed that they did.

Tina Wahlert asked whether there was a bill requiring students to pass the FORT in order to graduate, and Able responded that there was no such bill at this time.

Another part of Able's work is to review the curricula of the targeted and intensive schools. Her team submitted a request for proposal (RFP) and received eight contracts, five of which were revised because initial bids were beyond budget. They will pick a proposal shortly and begin working with the vendor to develop a rubric for curriculum review. Ultimately, the goal will be to use this rubric to assess all curricula moving forward, not just those in the intensive and targeted schools.

Able's group also will lead a review of faculty qualifications, requiring faculty to complete LETRS or demonstrate completion of similar training. Participation in monthly peer-group training and monitoring will also be required. Successful faculty will be invited to share practices and resources.

Nelson asked whether Able's team is creating the new rubric from scratch or building based on pre-existing resources. Miriam responded that she is using a literacy workbook for curriculum review that has been used by others, though it needs to be revised.

Faculty in targeted programs will not be required to join the peer review groups, though all schools opted to do so. Those in standard programs are still encouraged to monitor their scores carefully to track how students are performing across components. They have access to the data analysis tool and the option to share data if they want feedback.

The Iowa Higher Ed Summit is June 3–4. The DE literacy team is working with a contractor to develop an HQIM for teaching assessment to higher ed candidates. The contractor will help create modules that programs can adopt in their courses.

Papae Wymore asked whether they had considered having faculty at programs in remediation take the FORT themselves. Able responded that taking it is recommended but not required. There would be legal considerations if it were to be made a requirement. Currently, they are considering what they plan to do with the data they receive this year. They are not expecting much difference from last year. Some programs are improving whereas others are not, so additional requirements or guidance may be necessary.

Wymore responded that she supports taking the FORT, and she has done so herself. Her program had a 73% pass rate the first time, and this past semester it was 100%. Taking the test allowed Wymore to help her students understand what was expected of them. Able added that she is currently working with the FORT vendor to negotiate a reduced rate for the prep course. So far, it seems as though programs with faculty who have completed LETRS training have students in their programs passing at higher rates.

Leah Zimmermann shared about the practice assessment the IRRC created. Able would like to receive more information about this. She had been under the impression that it cost money, and she was unaware that it was designed for pre-service teachers.

h. Upcoming events

Gosselink-Lemke spoke about the Iowa Science of Reading Summit. The DE literacy team will be presenting, and Director McKenzie Snow will provide remarks. Additionally, the Every Learner Forward Conference will take place July 7-9. The DE will share a document about professional development opportunities. There will be an HQIM Academy Session July 4 from 9:00-1:00 a.m. The DE just led Session 3 the day prior. Gwen Marra asked whether the PD sessions were free and where they were located. Wahlert responded that the ones offered by the state were free, though their locations varied, and some had multiple location options.

6. Updates from the Iowa Reading Research Center

John Speer introduced Niebling, and advisory council members introduced themselves and their roles. Zimmermann provided updates on current projects.

a. Middle school morphology

The middle school morphology project was just released. Zimmermann demonstrated the Morpheme Lab and associated content for supporting adolescent literacy and morphology instruction. Resources include the Word Dissector app, subject-area morpheme lists, an eLearning module, graphic organizers, and downloadable cards.

b. Caregiver supports for early literacy

The IRRC is currently wrapping up work on the Spark Early Literacy Hub, which will help caregivers support children's early literacy skills at home. The project team has created a brief course to help caregivers build understanding about early literacy and activities that support early literacy development. Resources will include the 10 Activities to Support Early Literacy booklet. The project team recently wrapped up filming demonstration videos for all of the activities the week prior. The team is also creating a Letter-Sound Spark app, which allows users to click on a letter and watch a video of the letter's pronunciation. Families will also be able to download a letter-sound memory match game. The project will be released in late May. Ascherman asked about the letter "f," and how we will separate the /f/ sound from the cluster /fr/. Zimmermann replied that it was difficult to make decisions regarding the representative words. The most important thing for the team was to focus on initial sounds when possible. The team also wanted to distinguish the words from those used by other centers' mnemonic

cards. Wahlert asked how the center planned to promote the resources. Zimmermann replied that they are planning to share the resources with CLSD educators and libraries. Wahlert suggested sharing the materials with Ryan Page with daycare at Health and Human Services. VanZuiden added that there are two homeschool gatherings each year, and those events could be good opportunities to promote the material.

c. Handwriting

Keller Young spoke about the center's handwriting resources. The center released new handwriting assessments this past fall. Currently, the research team is engaged in a pilot study with the print and cursive curricula. They are currently conducting pre- and post-assessments and interviews with teachers about usability and feasibility of the materials. This data will allow the center to continue making improvements on the materials. The systematic review of cursive handwriting instruction and intervention is complete. The research team reviewed every study done related to cursive, with 26 studies included in the review. She shared a one-page summary of the study with the advisory council, and added that a longer technical report will be published before the end of June. The center will have one more update to the handwriting resources coming out before the end of the school year related to word-level practice with print. This update will consist of dynamic PDFs with customizable letter selection. Educators will be able to pick letters, and a PDF will be built with target letters at the top of the page, along with words containing the letters. This will allow students to practice segmenting, blending letter sounds, and encoding. The cursive version will consist of handouts with blanks for educators to complete to provide more flexibility for the added complexity of cursive writing. Nelson asked whether the letters would be close together. Young responded that she is working with the programmer to ensure the letters are close together and look like a word when combined. Ascherman added that Lifty with arms extended could be a good image to help students identify letters that extend above the midline.

d. Fidelity

Young provided updates on the fidelity project, Measure FIRST. The survey is scheduled to close on May 5th. So far, 159 surveys have been completed. Afterwards, the project team will lead focus groups to discuss usability and feasibility of the Measure FIRST tool. The systematic review on fidelity and alignment is complete. Young shared a one-page summary with the advisory council. Thirty-five studies were included. The review focused on alignment across Tiers 1 and 2 and the reporting of fidelity of implementation. The research team found that studies reported fidelity and alignment inconsistently, underscoring the importance of transparent data collection and reporting around fidelity. The technical report associated with this study will be released in June.

e. Iowa Science of Reading Summit

Niebling spoke about the upcoming Iowa Science of Reading Summit, which will take place on June 16 and 17. Registration is open and ongoing. Those with the promo code IASOR26! can receive a discount at registration. Niebling encouraged advisory council members to share the code with others. Niebling

added that he was recently on-site at the venue, and he is excited about set-up. He encouraged advisory council members to continue to spread the word about the summit

f. Summer reading

Speer spoke about the center's upcoming resources related to summer reading. He added the research is mixed on the effectiveness of summer reading programs. The center plans to release a framework on the components of summer literacy programs that have research support. Speer is also working with several organizations that have informal summer reading journals. He is hoping to partner with them and share the journals with educators. The journals are program-agnostic and offer a range of activities that could be applied to any book. These journaling activities provide flexibility and choice for schools.

Gosselink-Lembke added that she and Niebling had met with Dr. Katie Miles, who is president of the Reading Institute. She had shared that there are some well-developed summer reading programs that are effective and free. Speer responded that he had reached out to Miles. There are some seminal studies showing certain programs work, though other studies do not replicate those findings. However, there are some similar components across effective summer reading programs, so the center's summer reading framework will identify these components and identify reliable sources for additional information.

7. Break

Advisory council members took a break at 10:48 a.m. The meeting resumed at 10:53 a.m.

8. Iowa Reading Research Center future planning

Speer outlined plans for future IRRC work. Based on feedback and guidance from the advisory council and the DE, the center identified three primary areas of work: technical assistance and PD, maintenance and enhancement, and innovation and development. The center engaged all partners officially and unofficially and received quite a bit of feedback. The final three priority areas were shared during the January meeting. The center has drafted four priorities that fit into the three areas. The center is working with the DE to review and revise the draft for the upcoming scope of work. The final draft will hopefully be completed in the next 7-10 days and sent to the state to sign.

a. Science of reading implementation

Zimmermann spoke about one priority identified in the scope of work: science of reading implementation. This priority focuses on increasing uptake of evidence-based literacy practices across the state. This will be accomplished largely through in-person and virtual PD for Iowa educators. The center has added staff to assist with PD delivery—specifically, Niebling and another technical assistance provider. The center will still have a focus on research, but going forward, balancing research and implementation will be a priority. Additionally, the center plans to focus on literacy practices in secondary classrooms. This will involve creating an eLearning module on the literacy needs of and strategies for secondary students across content areas. Research shows that intervention is not sufficient to improve student literacy performance in secondary grades, so efforts to shore up student literacy need to be school-wide. This project will include the development of a PD toolkit that coaches and consultants can

deliver. Research to support this work will include an observation study of literacy practices in Iowa classrooms. The most recent studies of this nature were conducted in 2015/2016. Given updated legislation and a recent push for science of reading, it would be helpful to know what is happening in Iowa classrooms, which will help guide the development of needed supports. The center also plans to conduct focus groups on the PD toolkits to gather feedback to guide improvements. The center will continue to hold the annual Iowa Science of Reading Summit in person as well.

Steuri added that the Florida Center for Reading Research and Wested.org have done a lot of work in this area. She added that Nelson can connect with colleagues who do work on this area as well.

b. Maintenance and enhancement

Zimmermann spoke about the second priority area: maintenance and enhancement. She clarified that this does not mean that the center is just going to keep doing the same thing as always. This year, the center intends to focus on enhancing existing content related to dyslexia. IRRRC stakeholders identified dyslexia resources as a priority. The center plans to create a Dyslexia Hub on its website, centralizing resources for students with dyslexia and their families and educators. The hub will include a revised Dyslexia Overview eLearning module with sensitivity to those who have already completed it—the center will continue to maintain their records of completion. The center will create a PD toolkit to accompany the module. For research, the center plans to conduct a survey on teachers' knowledge of dyslexia and reading difficulties. There is currently limited research that expands our understanding of reading difficulties beyond dyslexia. The survey will include more application-based questions about how they apply their knowledge of reading strategies.

The center will also conduct a small pilot study with the newly released caregiver support materials. The study will examine the impact of the 10 Activities to Spark Early Literacy and the Letter-Sound Spark app.

Wymore added that she would like to see mock data and assessments included in the survey to understand educators' ability to make meaning of literacy data.

Buryanek asserted the importance of aligning dyslexia materials with those created by Decoding Dyslexia Iowa (DDIA). Steuri agreed, adding that this will help avoid duplicating resources. She suggested sharing the eLearning module with parents of newly diagnosed students.

VanZuiden added that she leads a lot of dyslexia simulations around the state, which have had a profound impact. DDIA would be happy to partner with the IRRRC on this project.

c. Innovation and design

Zimmermann continued with the next priority: innovation and design. Zimmermann shared that text generation was identified as a priority for many stakeholders. To comprehend text, students need to use writing. Writing is also an important component of the Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP). The center plans to create a hub with customizable materials to support writing-to-learn activities and strategies for different stages in the writing process. Static, printable materials would include graphic organizers and templates for informational and argumentative writing aligned to state

standards in science and social studies. The center will also create dynamic PDFs that could be customized based on student grade level, writing genre, and content area. Educators will also be able to select various scaffolds and support (e.g., sentence frames, visual aids). Additionally, the center plans to create an eLearning module demonstrating the strategies with exemplar videos. There would also be a PD toolkit designed to train educators on these practices.

Nelson inquired whether the center would integrate self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) with these materials. Zimmermann responded that this was a consideration. Nelson added that her school is doing SRSD integrated with UFLI (University of Florida Literacy Institute) and CKLA (Core Knowledge Language Arts) the next year.

d. DE and IRRC partnership

Speer discussed the final priority: DE and IRRC partnership. He underscored the importance of the DE and the IRRC working together in order to avoid duplicating efforts. The IRRC leadership team will attend DE meetings (e.g., department assessment and CLSD work teams) to stay apprised of upcoming work. The DE and IRRC will work together to develop an Iowa Literacy Clearinghouse, which would be a “one-stop shop” of literacy resources. The DE and the center also discussed collaborating on a statewide survey to get a snapshot of where literacy instruction is in the state of Iowa.

Niebling concluded the discussion of the scope of work. Now that the IRRC has laid out the draft scope of work, the center would like to receive feedback on the draft. Advisory council members are encouraged to take five minutes to complete a survey to submit feedback. Center staff will take the feedback, review it, and incorporate it into the draft.

9. Moment of appreciation for outgoing advisory council members

The advisory council took a moment to thank VanZuiden and Stanley for their service on the council as their terms come to an end.

10. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:40 a.m.