

Background

"The ability to read fluently and for understanding...is perhaps the most important foundational skill for U.S. adult citizens' health, well-being, and social and economic advancement. It is a gateway to lifelong learning, education, and training" (Sabatini, 2015, p. 1). However, only 35% of fourth grade students in the United States read grade level material proficiently. Even more alarming is the discrepancy between white and black children with 45% of white children scoring at the proficient level or above compared to 18% of black children (NAEP, 2019). Illiteracy is arguably the single greatest challenge in education today given both the overwhelming number of students failing to reach grade level reading standards and the achievement gap for historically marginalized groups of children.

We are facing a perfect storm in the U.S. given the challenges of an existing literacy crisis, a global pandemic resulting in loss of academic engaged time, particularly for students from underrepresented groups, a lack of teacher knowledge in the science of reading, and a lack of evidence-based strategies for reading instruction in the primary grades. Although the pandemic has affected children and families of all backgrounds across the U.S., its impact has been far greater on children who are non-white and living in poverty. The achievement gap, which has been present for decades, has not improved over the past 50 years, and the pandemic has not only exacerbated the problem, but perhaps revealed the magnitude of this chasm.

This problem did not happen overnight, and it will take the efforts of all of us, researchers, policy-makers, teachers, parents, and the community to make up the ground we have lost due to a myriad of issues, not the least of which is systemic inequities in the education system. The University of Florida Lastinger Center works to create equitable educational systems where every child and educator, regardless of circumstances, experiences high-quality learning every day to support children's achievement of critical milestones that are predictive of success in school and life. Our research shows that a child who meets major

educational milestones, including reading proficiently by third grade, experiences the most success later on in life.

The UF Lastinger Center is committed to improving student outcomes by developing innovative solutions that can be implemented at scale with fidelity. Our own listening tour of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Zhao et al., 2020) and extensive literature reviews point to the need for a novel approach to improving reading outcomes across the country.

The Children's Trust of Alachua County will partner with the University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning (UFLC) to conduct a Comprehensive Needs Assessment to identify the specific early language and literacy learning needs of each level of the Alachua school district ecosystem: district personnel, school administrators, coaches, teachers, paraprofessionals, school based staff, and students. The Needs Assessment data will inform the development of a comprehensive professional learning plan aimed at improving student literacy achievement for all students.

Comprehensive Needs Assessment

The UFLC is a nationally recognized leader in researching and creating innovative learning and educational strategies to improve the well-being of children from birth through age 18. The Center's extensive expertise in researching, creating, implementing, and evaluating educational initiatives results in improved teaching and learning that advances youth development. An integral step in the program development process and later implementation is to identify the needs of the organization (i.e., district, schools, and community). To develop and deliver an educational program that results in improved outcomes for stakeholders, the partner organizations (e.g., Children's Trust of Alachua County, Alachua County Public Schools, and UFLC) must first be informed of the existing structure, including the strengths, assets, and limitations. The assessor initially identifies the assets and needs of the district. A need is the "discrepancy or gap between 'what is' and 'what should be'" (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995, p. 4). The "what is" is the current state, the "what should be" is the desired or expected outcome, and the gap is the identified need(s). UFLC must understand what needs to be targeted with

professional development in order to help achieve the desired situation (the "what should be"). A needs assessment is "a systematic set of procedures undertaken for the purpose of setting priorities and making decisions about program or organizational improvement and allocation of resources" (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995, p. 4).

In addition to identifying what is lacking, the UFLC will utilize Asset Mapping as a tool to "assess and mobilize what a community has" rather than what it lacks (Human Services Commission, 2013, p. 3). This technique: (1) uncovers resources found in a community; (2) relies on the assets within a community at a specific time; and (3) seeks to build linkages among local people, institutions, and organizations (Human Services Commission, 2013). Asset Mapping is not a needs assessment tool, but it provides UFLC with an additional approach to better understand their community (Berkowitz & Wadud, 2018).

UFLC will follow a Three-Phase Plan for assessing the learning needs of educators and students in Alachua County Public Schools. (see Figure 1). The first phase, Pre-assessment, is exploratory by nature and seeks to help prepare the needs assessment for implementation. Assessment is the second phase; data gathering and analysis occur during this phase. During the last phase, Post-assessment, the UFLC will help determine priorities and communicate the results to the district.

Three Phases of the Comprehensive Needs Assessment

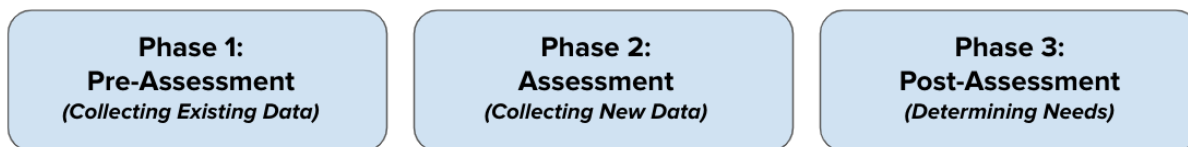


Figure 1: Three Phase of the Comprehensive Needs Assessment adapted from Witkin & Altschuld (1995).

Phase 1: Pre-Assessment

The purpose of the pre-assessment phase is to (a) investigate what is already known about the needs of the target group, (b) determine the focus and scope of the assessment, and (c) gain commitment for all stages of the assessment, including the use of findings for program

planning and implementation (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). The pre-assessment phase also provides the beginning stages of collecting the most appropriate data sources for the foundational understanding of the target group and their community. UFLC will work with the Children's Trust of Alachua County and the district to form a Needs Assessment Committee (NAC). A NAC is a critical part of a comprehensive needs assessment. The committee should include stakeholders that represent all parts of the system: superintendents, district office staff, principals, teachers, paraprofessionals, school office staff, parents/guardians, community members, and students all have important information about the system. UFLC will collaborate with NAC to create a management plan, gather pre-existing information, and determine the appropriate needs assessment approach. Existing datasets are often available to help identify what certain needs exist as well as to identify target audiences and locate previously conducted programs and assessment information (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). During the pre-assessment phase, we will collect data from internal and external sources as outlined in Table 1, Comprehensive Needs Assessment Activity Overview. The data points listed in Table 1 are not exhaustive of the possible data points that the UFLC and NAC may identify as useful to the process.

At the conclusion of the pre-assessment information gathering phase, UFLC will work in tandem with the NAC to determine any additional data that are needed and the assessment tool(s) that will be utilized. The group will identify gaps in the data, determine if sufficient qualitative and quantitative data are present, and consider whether additional information is warranted to triangulate the data.

Phase 2: Assessment

UFLC will work with the NAC to select valid and reliable assessments to collect any missing information; surveys, focus groups, observations, and established standards-based curriculum measures may be utilized. A matrix will be used as an organizational tool to name the data measures, plan activities, and establish timelines for implementation. The UFLC will

work in coordination with the Children's Trust of Alachua County and the school district to employ equitable assessment practices such as consistently worded survey items, scripts, and trained interviewers who do not intentionally introduce bias into the data collection process.

Phase 3: Post-Assessment

UFLC will compile and organize the data prior to facilitating analysis by the NAC. UFLC will utilize the School Reform Initiative Data Driven Dialogue Protocol to guide the NAC through the process of making shared meaning of the data. The protocol includes four phases that "help replace hunches and feelings with data-based facts, examine patterns and trends of performance indicators, and generate root-cause discussions that move from identifying symptoms to possible causes of student performance" (Teacher Development Group, 2002). Once the assessment data are analyzed, the UFLC will work with the NAC to prioritize the needs using a multiple criteria approach. A multiple criteria approach examines each need individually to gauge its importance and feasibility. The priority of each need is considered based on the level of risk it creates if unaddressed.

UFLC will provide the Children's Trust of Alachua County with a Final Comprehensive Needs Report. The report will include a description of the Comprehensive Needs Assessment process that transpired, the collected data with an analysis narrative, the prioritized needs as identified by the NAC, an executive summary, and UFLC's recommendations for specific strategies and activities that address the prioritized needs. UFLC will outline the Flamingo Literacy products and services that offer evidence-based solutions to the identified needs. The resources will include products and services from the UFLC and other evidence-based solutions.

UFLC Comprehensive Literacy System

UFLC has a suite of literacy-focused programs designed to support educators at all levels of the educational ecosystem; instructional leaders, literacy coaches, teachers, and paraprofessionals. The professional learning supports are rooted in the science of reading and

provide educators with the foundational knowledge and skills necessary to provide high-quality literacy instruction. The Flamingo Literacy Matrix, Flamingo Small Group Literacy Instruction, and Literacy Coaching Program are examples of professional learning offered by the UFLC to equip educators with the knowledge and skills to teach reading effectively.

*The **Flamingo Literacy Matrix** is an online professional development system built in partnership with Just Read, Florida! and the Florida Department of Education. It is an approved route to the Florida Reading Endorsement and satisfies the Dyslexia 40-hour renewal requirement. The systematic training prepares teachers to effectively teach reading, diagnose issues, and intervene appropriately using evidence-based strategies. Educators in Alachua County Public Schools can participate in the Literacy Matrix even if they have previously earned their Reading Endorsement; the Literacy Matrix provides educators with personalized learning paths based on their individual data results.*

***Flamingo Small Group Literacy Instruction** is an evidenced-based small-group reading model developed by the UFLC to support both instructor development and student development. Instructors receive job-embedded support on the evidence-based strategies that comprise the science of reading. These strategies are integrated into one instructional model that is used in conjunction with a comprehensive reading program. After years of research and teacher focus groups, UFLC has identified key components that are necessary and sufficient to develop skilled readers (Lane et al., 2009; Pullen et al., 2005). Several factors, such as the intentional use of student data, an emphasis on grapho-phonemic (letter-sound) information, and the use of a variety of text, distinguish this model from other popular models and improve student outcomes. The model includes daily vocabulary instruction that builds background knowledge and increases comprehension; this is of particular importance for striving readers.*

*The **Flamingo Literacy Coach Endorsement Program**, built in partnership with Just Read, Florida! and the Florida Department of Education, is an online program created to equip literacy coaches with the skills, expertise, and resources to support educators and improve literacy outcomes for all students. The program is grounded in the science of reading and effective literacy coaching practices as outlined in the Florida Department of Education Literacy*

Coaching Definition, Domains, and Standards (FDOE, 2022). This endorsement program also includes a unique online feature: Literacy Coaching Playbooks, a suite of resources for literacy coaches to use in their work with educators. Each playbook provides Literacy Coaches with resources that align with the Big 5 domains of reading development identified by the National Reading Panel Report of 2000, with two separate decoding playbooks to differentiate instruction for early and advanced decoding. The six Flamingo Literacy Playbooks are Phonological Awareness, Early Decoding, Advanced Decoding, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension. The UFLC developed the Flamingo Literacy Playbooks to ensure that Literacy Coaches have evidence-based literacy content at their fingertips when providing job-embedded support to educators. Additional literacy-focused professional learning programs are available specifically for school district personnel and school administrators.

Tables 1 and 2 included below outline the specific activities, events, and timeline for each phase of the Comprehensive Needs Assessment process.

Table 1: Comprehensive Needs Assessment Activity Overview		
Phase	Activity	Timeline
PHASE 1: Pre-Assessment <i>(Collecting Existing Data)</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> UFLC works with school district leaders to identify and form a Needs Assessment Committee (NAC) that will comprise stakeholders that represent the system in its entirety. UFLC works with the NAC to create a management plan, gather pre-existing information (internally and externally), and determine the appropriate needs assessment approach. Data about student achievement, student demographics, curriculum and instruction, support services, assessment plans, professional development, technology, and family/community involvement are collected. A comprehensive needs assessment examines information from various sources; the data sources listed below are likely to be used. 	<i>March 2024</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Strategic Planning Documents b. Program Evaluations c. Data Reports d. Budgets e. Schedules f. Survey results <p>3. UFLC works with the NAC to review the gathered preexisting information and determine if additional data are needed. The group identifies gaps in the data, determines if sufficient qualitative and quantitative data is present, and considers whether additional information is warranted to triangulate the data.</p> <p>4. UFLC works with the NAC to select valid and reliable assessments to collect any missing information; surveys, focus groups, observations, and established standards-based curriculum measures may be utilized.</p>	
<p>PHASE 2: Assessment <i>(Collecting New Data)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The UFLC and NAC develop a plan and timeline for administering the new assessments. Equitable assessment practices such as consistently worded survey items, scripts, and trained interviewers who do not intentionally introduce bias into the data collection process will be employed. 2. UFLC associates and district leaders conduct school site visits to collect missing information identified during the pre-assessment phase. Classroom observations and interviews may be conducted. 	<p><i>April 2024</i></p>
<p>PHASE 3: Post-Assessment <i>(Determining Needs)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Once the assessment data are analyzed, the UFLC will work with the NAC to prioritize the needs using a multiple criteria approach and risk assessment. 2. UFLC provides the Children’s Trust of Alachua County and NAC with a Final Comprehensive Needs Report that includes the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Description of the Comprehensive Needs Assessment Process that includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. UFLC associates and NAC members ii. Outline of Activities iii. Data sources and tools iv. Data collection protocols b. Collected data with analysis narrative <i>(data is de-identified)</i> c. Prioritized list of needs determined by the NAC 	<p><i>May/June 2024</i></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> d. Executive summary e. UFLC recommendations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Recommendation identifies specific strategies and activities to address prioritized areas <i>(recommendations build on strengths identified in the data and may include additional partners)</i> 	
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Table 2: Comprehensive Needs Assessment Schedule of Events				
	Initial Launch <i>February 2024</i>	Phase 1 <i>March 2024</i>	Phase 2 <i>April 2024</i>	Phase 3 <i>May/June 2024</i>
Organization and District Leaders	Initial meeting <i>(2-hours, on-site)</i>	<i>Bi-weekly Meetings (1 hour, virtual)</i>	<i>Monthly Meetings (1 hour, virtual)</i> <i>School Visits (2-days, 12 hours, on-site)</i>	Presentation of Final Report <i>(2-hours, on-site)</i>
NAC*	Initial meeting <i>(3-hours, on-site)</i>	Data Review and Assessment Planning <i>(6-hours, on-site)</i>		<i>Data Analysis (2-days, 12 hours, on-site)</i>

*Needs Assessment Committee

Proposed Scope of Work

Timeline: February 1, 2024 - June 30, 2024	
Comprehensive Needs Assessment Process	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● INITIAL LAUNCH (February) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Initial meeting with district leaders - <i>2-hours on-site</i> ○ Initial meeting with NAC* - <i>3-hours on-site</i> ● PHASE 1: Pre-Assessment Phase (March) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Creation of a Preliminary Pre-Assessment Data Report ○ Data Review and Assessment Planning Session with NAC - <i>6-hours on-site</i> ● PHASE 2: Assessment Phase (April) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ School visits with district leaders - <i>2-days, 12-hours on-site</i> ● PHASE 3: Post-Assessment (May/June) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Data Analysis Session with NAC - <i>1-day, 6-hours on-site</i> ○ Final Comprehensive Needs Assessment Report ○ Presentation of Final Report with District Leaders - <i>2-hours on-site</i> 	
Communication and Project Management	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ongoing meetings with the Children’s Trust of Alachua County - <i>monthly February-May</i> ● Internal project management to ensure timely completion of deliverables - <i>February-May</i> 	
<i>*Needs Assessment Committee</i>	Total: \$ 175,000

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