



Hope School K-5 teacher Jeremy McKibben leads third grade students in an activity associate with CKLA's "How Does Your Body Work?" unit on Wednesday, Oct. 18, 2023, in Hope, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Hara/Peninsula Clarion)

From Hope to Homer, KPBSD adjusts to Alaska Reads Act

ADVERTISEMENT

Implementing the standards outlined by the legislation is not a one-size-fits-all approach

By Ashlyn O'Hara

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KENAI PENINSULA BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT LOCAL NEWS
NEWS

More than a year after Gov. Mike Dunleavy signed the Alaska Reads Act into law, staff and students around the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District are working to bring themselves

up to speed on a new literacy curriculum, new assessments and new professional development, all newly effective this school year.

Like a lot of things applied unilaterally to the KPBSD, which prides itself on having “42 diverse schools,” implementing the standards outlined by the legislation is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

The Alaska Reads Act aims to get Alaska’s elementary students reading at grade level by the time they finish third grade. From multigrade classrooms in communities like Hope, to schools where most students speak English as a second language like in Razdolna, teachers are newly following the same curriculum road map and making it work for their students.

KPBSD administrators are also not exempt from the workload that comes with such a robust approach to student literacy. Between ensuring their district is squared away legally and finding money to support new programs, staff in schools around the borough have their hands full this school year.

The Alaska Reads Act

The 45-page Alaska Reads Act was passed by the 32nd Alaska Legislature during its second regular session, which ended in May 2022. The bill was signed into law by Gov. Mike Dunleavy in June 2022 and became effective July 1, 2023, meaning the current school year is the first that the legislation has been implemented.

At a ceremony celebrating the bill, held the month after it passed at Turnagain Elementary School, Dunleavy called enabling elementary students to read at grade level a “moral imperative” for Alaska.

“For those of you that really like reading, you’re going to like it more,” Dunleavy said, speaking to students. “For those of you that want to learn how to read, but maybe it’s not that easy, we’re going to help you. So our goal is that every single boy and girl, urban (and) rural, doesn’t matter where they’re from, they’re going to look back on this day ... and this will be the day that we began this process of this moral imperative.”

Elizabeth Greninger, the assessment administrator for the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, invoked the Alaska Reads Act in December 2022, when announcing at a press conference the results of a new statewide standardized test administered to third through ninth graders. Those results, Greninger said, showed that 70% of assessed students did not meet grade level English Language Arts expectations.

“All grades in three through nine have upwards of 60% of students in the two nonproficient achievement levels, with almost 80% of students in grade three not meeting grade level expectations,” Greninger said. “This data point underscores the importance of the efforts being undertaken in the Alaska Reads Act.”

When it comes to actually putting the spirit and new regulations of the legislation into action, though, the onus is on individual school districts to make sure their administrators, teachers and students get with the program.

New guidelines

To support the state’s mission of boosting student literacy, the Alaska Reads Act itemizes new programs targeted toward boosting literacy, requires Alaska’s K-3 educators to obtain a new reading endorsement through the state and says school districts must implement intensive intervention services for students who demonstrate a reading deficiency.

Included in the legislation are four new programs aimed at assisting Alaska students to be able to read by the time they finish third grade:

District Reading Intervention Program;

Department Reading Program;

Early Education Programs; and

Alaska Distance Learning Consortium.

Of those programs, the District Reading Intervention Program is required by the Alaska Reads Act of all school districts.

Districts must screen K-3 students multiple times per year to gauge proficiency at grade-level skills, such as phonemic awareness in kindergarten, letter word sound fluency in first grade, and vocabulary and oral reading fluency of students in second and third grade.

Specifically, the legislation says school districts must offer “intensive reading intervention services to students in grades kindergarten through three who exhibit a reading deficiency to assist students in achieving reading proficiency at or above grade level by the end of grade three.”

Such an intervention includes the creation of culturally responsive individual reading improvement plans, shorthanded to “IRIPs,” for each K-3 student who has “an identified deficit” on a literacy screener. The improvement plans are to be created after a student completes a literacy screener assessment and to identify skill gaps that will be addressed.

If a student gets to the end of third grade and demonstrates both that they have a reading deficiency and do not have the reading skills needed to advance to fourth grade, that student may be held back a year or be required to receive additional intervention services.

The legislation specifically says that such practices will apply to third grade students who demonstrate a reading deficiency on their spring literacy screener and who also lack “sufficient reading skills to progress to grade four.” A district superintendent may also exempt a student from being held back if they determine it is in the student’s best interests.

The Alaska Reads Act says a student demonstrates the reading skills required to move onto fourth grade when that student:

Scores at or above grade level on statewide screening tool or summative assessment;

Achieves an acceptable score on an alternative reading assessment as determined and approved by the state; or

Demonstrates mastery of reading standards through a reading portfolio using criteria established by the state

The student's parent or guardian will ultimately decide whether the student will repeat third grade, or participate in an additional 20 hours of reading intervention services during the summer before they enter fourth grade.

The Alaska Reads Act also newly requires Alaska's kindergarten through third grade teachers to complete evidence-based literacy training through a program that has been approved by the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development.

All certified educators who teach, provide or supervise reading instruction to K-3 students are required to complete the training, according to a "Frequently Asked Questions" document published by KPBSD. The district created a [website](#) that outlines the different ways district staff can obtain the endorsement.

Eligible programs include LETRS, a two-year course available for teachers and administrators, and Keys to Literacy, which the district bills as a less intensive version of LETRS. District staff must have completed their selected course by July 1, 2025.

Science of Reading

One of the first things DEED did after Dunleavy signed the Alaska Reads Act was create a noncompetitive grant program that gave school districts money to adopt research-based literacy curricula.

The Kenai Peninsula Borough School District applied for funds and received just under \$1 million to implement a new curriculum pre-vetted by the state.

KPBSD Assistant Superintendent Kari Dendurent said KPBSD had some reservations about applying because it had just implemented iReady, a new math curriculum to which teachers were still getting acclimated. The

district was hesitant, she said, to ask teachers to take on a new literacy program, too.

“That’s a lot to ask for our teachers to do,” she said.

KPBSD ultimately signed on to adopt a new literacy curriculum.

As a result, the state presented KPBSD with seven programs. Those programs were reviewed by a 25-member KPBSD curriculum adoption committee. All but one voted in favor of the district adopting Amplify’s Core Knowledge Language Arts curriculum, often shortened to just “CKLA,” for the KPBSD’s K-6 students.

“All but one in the Literacy Curriculum Adoption Committee chose CKLA,” Dendurent said. “It was pretty overwhelming.”

As of this school year, 38 of the KPBSD’s 42 schools are using CKLA. Three of the schools not using the new curriculum this year are charter schools, which are allowed to adopt their own curriculum, and the other is Marathon School, which serves detained youth.

CKLA, like each of the seven programs put forth for consideration by DEED, is based on the concept of the “Science of Reading.” As described by Amplify, the phrase refers to the significant amount of research that’s been done on figuring out how students best learn to read.

The theory at the center of the Science of Reading, Amplify says, is called the “Simple View,” first proposed by researchers Philip Gough and Bill Tunmer with the University of Texas in 1986.

That theory explains that being able to convert written words into speech and understanding that speech are both skills needed for reading comprehension.

When it comes to decoding letters and words, Amplify says children first learning to read usually already understand spoken language. However, if they aren’t able to decode the meaning of words and letters when written down, they won’t be able to read those words or letters.

“If you can’t decode the symbols in a sentence, you can’t read it — even if you know the language in which it’s written,” Amplify staff wrote in a March 15, 2022, article called “What is the Science of Reading, anyway?”

Other resources about the Science of Reading prepared by Amplify explain that teaching the letter “E,” for example, is not as simple as saying that it makes the sound at the beginning of the word “end.” Rather, there are at least six different ways the letter “E” can be pronounced in English, and students need to know all of them in order to decode words.

In multiple classrooms around the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District throughout the month of October, administrators, teachers and students all demonstrated familiarity with the Science of Reading principles.

“What current research is showing is that kids learn best through the Science of Reading model,” said Fireweed Academy Principal Kyle Darbonne. “That’s essentially learning those decoding skills, alongside language comprehension with things like vocabulary and background knowledge, and all of that (getting) multiplied together for reading comprehension.”

Darbonne is just one KPBSD administrator who’s been keeping himself up to date with literacy research as the rules associated with the Alaska Reads Act have been rolled out.

As a charter school, Fireweed Academy, located in Homer, is able to pick curricula that are different from those adopted by KPBSD. This year though, they ended up going with CKLA alongside the district, which Darbonne said he and Fireweed’s teachers liked because of its engaging texts for students. Since it was proposed by the State of Alaska, it also complies with the new state guidelines.

“We, as a charter, get to choose how to implement those standards from the (Alaska) Reads Act,” Darbonne said. “We don’t get to choose whether or not we do implement the standards from the (Alaska) Reads Act.”

Although nearly every school in the Kenai Peninsula Borough is in the process of rolling out CKLA, that process looks a little different depending on the school.

Implementation

On the morning of Oct. 18, Jeremy McKibben sat in the center of the “horseshoe” table, facing his two third grade students. He’s the K-5 teacher at Hope School, and administers CKLA to all five grade levels each day.

Behind him, on his classroom’s SMART Interactive Flat Panel, was a grid of 30 squares showing what literacy skills each grade level would work on per 20-minute interval between 9:10 and 10:30 a.m. At 10:50, McKibben started working with his two third graders, who were starting CKLA’s Unit 3, “How Does Your Body Work?”

“The spinal column is made up of more than 30 smaller bones, stack-,” one of the third graders read.

“What’s that word?” McKibben asked after the student stumbled on “stacked.”

“S-, st-, stacked,” the student sounded out and read before continuing.

“Stacked one on top of the other. These smaller bones are called vertebrae. The vertebrae protect a bundle of nerves called the spinal cord.”

CKLA is designed to give students 120 minutes of instruction each day. That number is not feasible, though, for a small school like Hope, where Jeremy teaches five grades. Jeremy said they’ve figured it out, and that he’s found he can usually deliver the bulk of the curriculum to his small number of students in about 45 minutes.

“We’ve got it down,” he said. “At the beginning of the year, it was kind of chaotic, but now that the first quarter is over it’s kind of ... working well.”

Cindy McKibben jumped in.

“He’s making it seem a lot less stressful than it was,” she said. “It was extremely stressful.”

She’s the principal of Hope School and also Jeremy’s wife. She’s encountered her own troubles throughout the implementation of CKLA, mostly having to do with technology, but said teachers are affected the most.

“That’s where all of this impact is, is on the teachers in the classroom, and I don’t think enough can be said for the lift that the teachers are doing (and) the work that they are putting in to (try) to make everything work and doing the best they can do,” she said. “They really are trying, and they really are stressed.”

One hundred miles away, at Mountain View Elementary School in Kenai, implementing CKLA is a team effort. The school’s trio of first grade teachers — Callie Giordano, Kristin Perkins and Barbara Ralston — altogether serve more than 50 students across their three classrooms.

The cohort has long been at the forefront of early literacy skills, even [bringing their students](#) to a December 2022 KPBSD Board of Education meeting to demonstrate how they each teach those skills to students. This year, they said they’re grabbing CKLA by the horns.

“When we change curriculum, we’re like, ‘OK, let’s go, jump with both feet in and let’s see where the holes are,’” Perkins said. “You’re not going to know unless you dive into it, so that’s what we’re doing with CKLA this year — diving in.”

Hannah Dolphin, the principal at Mountain View, said implementation of the curriculum happened quickly.

“A lot of teachers were kind of building their own program and shifting from that ... can be tricky,” Dolphin said. “That was hard at first, because this happened really quickly. We got a grant from the state, it was adopted really quickly, we got the materials and we hit the ground running.”

Giordano, Perkins and Ralston said they’ve learned through CKLA the importance of using correct terminology — such as “phonemes” and “graphemes” instead of “sounds” and “letters” — and of being consistent with instruction.

“Students are capable of using rich oral vocabulary,” Giordano said. “If you set the bar high, they’ll get there. I feel like the Alaska Reads Act is setting the bar high, but also ... they’re giving us a program, they’re giving us training, they’re giving us all of these things. They’re expecting this, and here’s how we’re going to make it happen.”

In the same way teachers at KPBSD's small schools are adapting CKLA to their needs, the teachers at Razdolna School are reporting similar experiences administering the curriculum to their bilingual students — many of whom grow up learning a language that doesn't even use the Latin alphabet. That hasn't slowed down, though, Principal Dr. Michael Sturm, who said staff and students are working hit the Alaska Reads Act's standards.

“They've set high standards for our kids and we set high standards for our kids,” Sturm said. “The expectation is that they meet them and we're going to do our best to get them there.”

Joolee Aurand, who teaches second and third grade at Razdolna School, says her students have done well with CKLA materials so far this school year.

On the morning of Oct. 24, her student's were reading “The Panther,” from CKLA's “Bedtime Tales” unit. In between taking turns reading lines aloud from the story, the students often turned to each other to chat in Russian before switching seamlessly back to English to read the next line.

Aurand said her students don't mix up the English and Russian alphabets as often as one might think. Some students struggled, she said, when they came back to school post-COVID-19, but mostly with letters that look the same when written down, but make different sounds in English and Russian.

“There was a lot of conflating of those things right after the pandemic,” Aurand said. “I see that improving just over my three years here. I can't say yet the effect that CKLA has on that, or will have on that.”

Sturm said students' proficiency in Russian sometimes works to their advantage when they start to learn English.

“If a kid can read in Russian, the transition to reading in English is pretty smooth,” Sturm said.

The biggest gap Razdolna works to bridge is in kindergarten, he said, when students who have almost exclusively been exposed to Russian or Slavic are suddenly being held to the same literacy standards as students who have

spoken English for their whole lives.

“While we don’t have CKLA translated word for word, we take those themes, those teaching practices and whatever sound they’re working on that day, and transition it to something usable in Russian,” Sturm said.

Measuring success

When all is said and done, though, how will education leaders gauge whether or not the goals of the Alaska Reads Act have been achieved? After the first round of literacy screeners were completed at the beginning of the school year, schools had a better idea of which students may need extra support to get to grade level standards.

Katie Schneider, an interventionist at Mountain View, spent the morning of Oct. 19 working with students to provide that extra support. Over the course of about 25 minutes, Schneider led a group of students through exercises and activities aimed at reinforcing the sound and structure of the letter “M.”

“What sound does ‘M’ make?” Schneider asked the group during one activity involving white boards. “You’re going to trace it, and then you’re going to erase it.”

Schneider is well-versed in the Science of Reading, having already finished her LETRS course, which she completed after school and on the weekends. Although she found the course informative, Schneider said she was a little frustrated that the information taught through LETRS wasn’t information she learned while getting, say, her master’s degree.

“I was really embarrassed that I had been teaching 15 years and I was learning this information,” Schneider said. “It made me feel very guilty about my past students and what I didn’t know.”

Extra support during the school year, though, isn’t the only way the Alaska Reads Act says districts must intervene to help a student who’s struggling. The legislation says students not reading at grade level by the end of third

grade may either be held back a year, or must undergo 20 hours of additional literacy instruction during the summer before they start fourth grade.

Some district leadership say they're still unclear, though, where the funding for those extra intervention services will come from.

At Razdolna School, Sturm said 17 of the school's 28 K-3 students — more than 60% — either already have or qualify for individual reading improvement plans. If there are students who require those additional 20 hours of intervention services at the end of the year, Sturm said he's not sure where the money will come from.

“I wish they would have had the foresight to allocate sufficient funding to implement it with fidelity,” said Sturm. “How are we going to tell kids they've got to do summer learning and have no funding to pay teachers to run organized summer learning? How do I squeeze another drop out of this to meet a legal mandate that is unfunded? I don't know the answer to that.”

KPBSD estimates that, on top of grant funds it received to buy CKLA, it will need an additional \$172,000 to pay for materials not covered by grant funds. Each additional interventionist hired costs about \$133,500 and the district must also compensate teachers for professional development hours. The district said Thursday that it has not yet estimated how much it will cost to offer 20 hours of summer remediation instruction for students who need it.

In addition to the Core Literacy grant used to purchase CKLA, Dendurent on Thursday said KPBSD also applied for and received two one-year grants — each worth \$500,000 — that can be used to support literacy initiatives in schools, including such elements of the Alaska Reads Act as intervention, after-school programs and professional development.

Concerns about funding for the new regulations come as KPBSD already faces a \$13.1 million deficit heading into the upcoming fiscal year. After extensive lobbying efforts last legislative session for a meaningful increase to the amount of money school districts receive from the state per student, also called the base student allocation, state lawmakers approved \$175 million in one-time funding for K-12 education. Dunleavy vetoed half of that amount, though.

KPBSD Superintendent Clayton Holland and other Alaska superintendents have previously, publicly expressed concerns about the “unfunded mandates” being put on districts by the Alaska Reads Act, which they say will strain districts’ already stretched resources.

Dunleavy’s office on Thursday pushed back on the phrase “unfunded mandates,” pointing to grant opportunities the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development has made available to districts specifically for the implementation of the Alaska Reads Act.

“Learning to read is not an unfunded mandate and is one of the core functions of public education,” Dunleavy’s office said via email.

Roughly one-third of Alaska’s operating budget is allocated to education, his office said, and the Alaska Reads Act makes funding available for districts.

When it comes to gauging whether or not the goals outlined by the Alaska Reads Act have been achieved, Dunleavy’s office said the number of students reading at grade level by third grade as measured by a state assessment will be “the most critical indicator of success.” The state will also evaluate the effectiveness of districts’ professional development opportunities.

“While it is still too early to determine the impact of the legislation, the Alaska Reads Act represents a significant investment in early literacy and could potentially lead to improved school accountability for reading achievement,” Dunleavy’s office said.

Holland said via text on Thursday that, while he thinks the Alaska Reads Act will be good for Alaska in the long run, he thinks people underestimated how much work it would to implement.

“Many schools in the state are understaffed and already stressed from the pandemic and ongoing budget woes,” Holland said. “The (Alaska Reads) Act added a lot of work at one time that contributes to even more stress.”

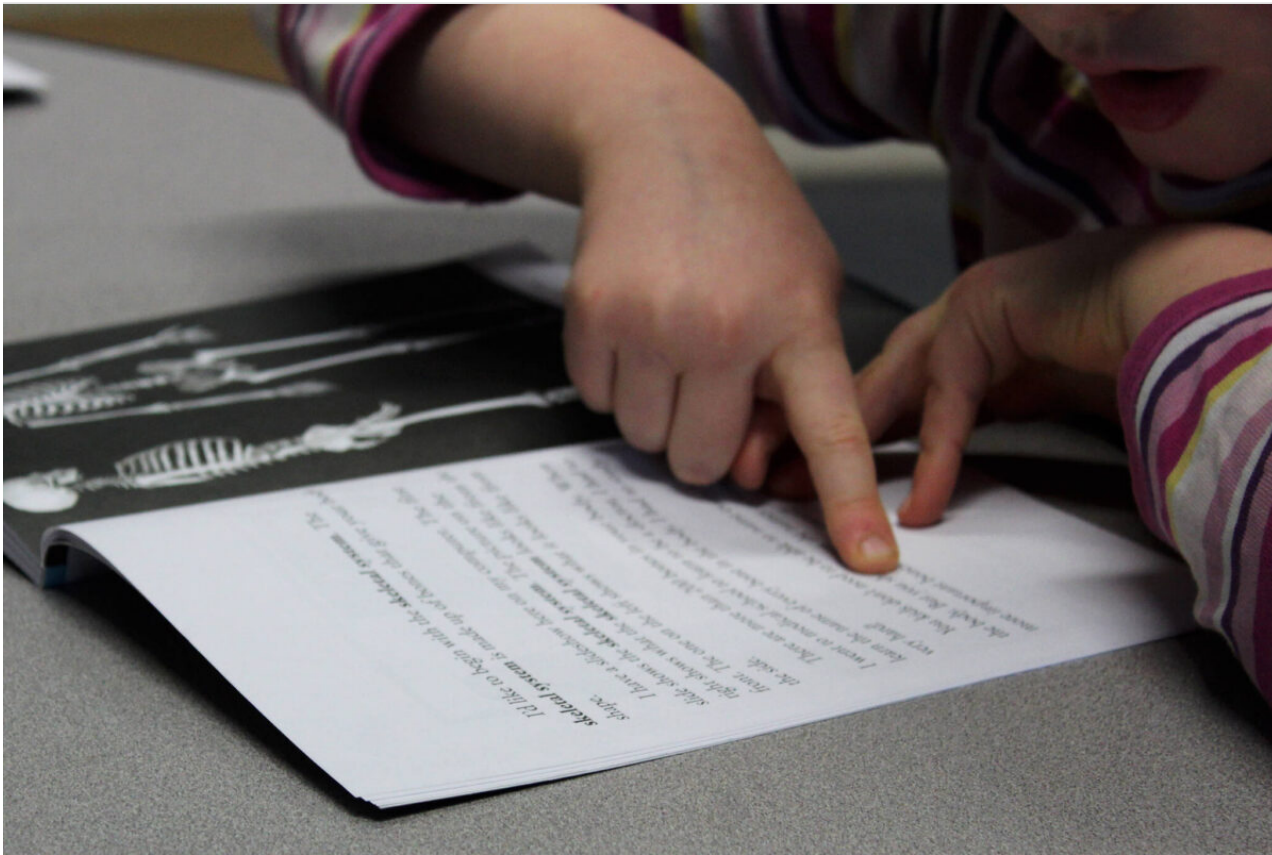
Holland said he is concerned about staff burnout and about elements of the legislation for which funding has not been made available, such as after-school tutoring. Still, he said KPBSD staff want to see students succeed.

“KPBSD staff are resilient and we are always going to work to do what is best for our students,” he added. “I am so thankful for the strong staff we have in the KPBSD and the community support for our educators.”

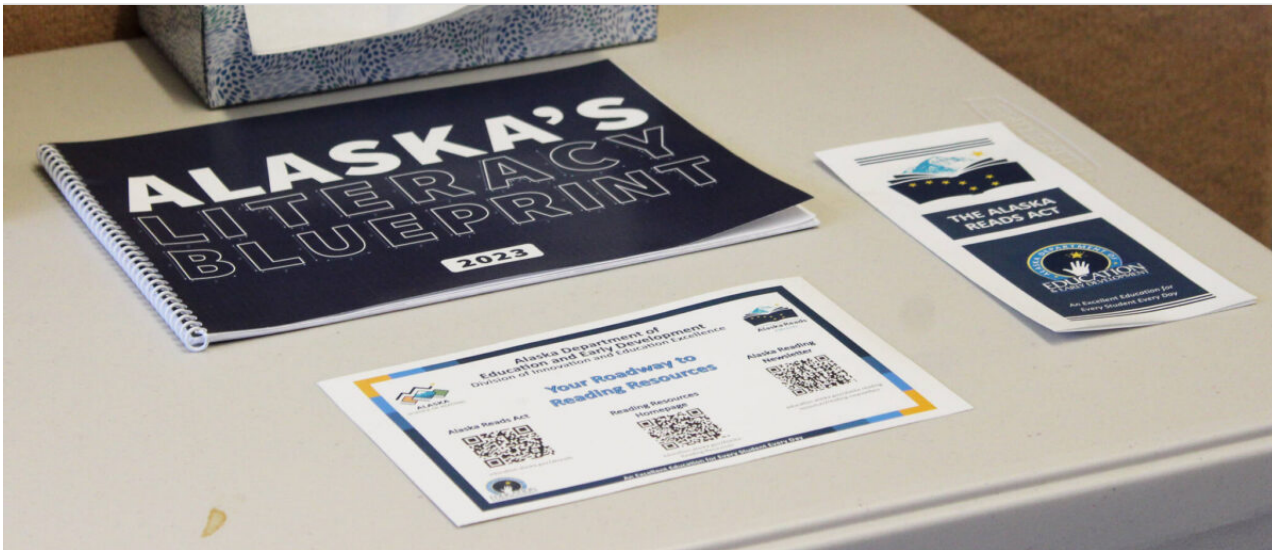
Reach reporter Ashlyn O’Hara at ashlyn.ohara@peninsulaclarion.com.



Hope School K-5 teacher Jeremy McKibben assists third grade students with reading skills part of CKLA's "How Does Your Body Work?" unit on Wednesday, Oct. 18, 2023, in Hope, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Hara/Peninsula Clarion)



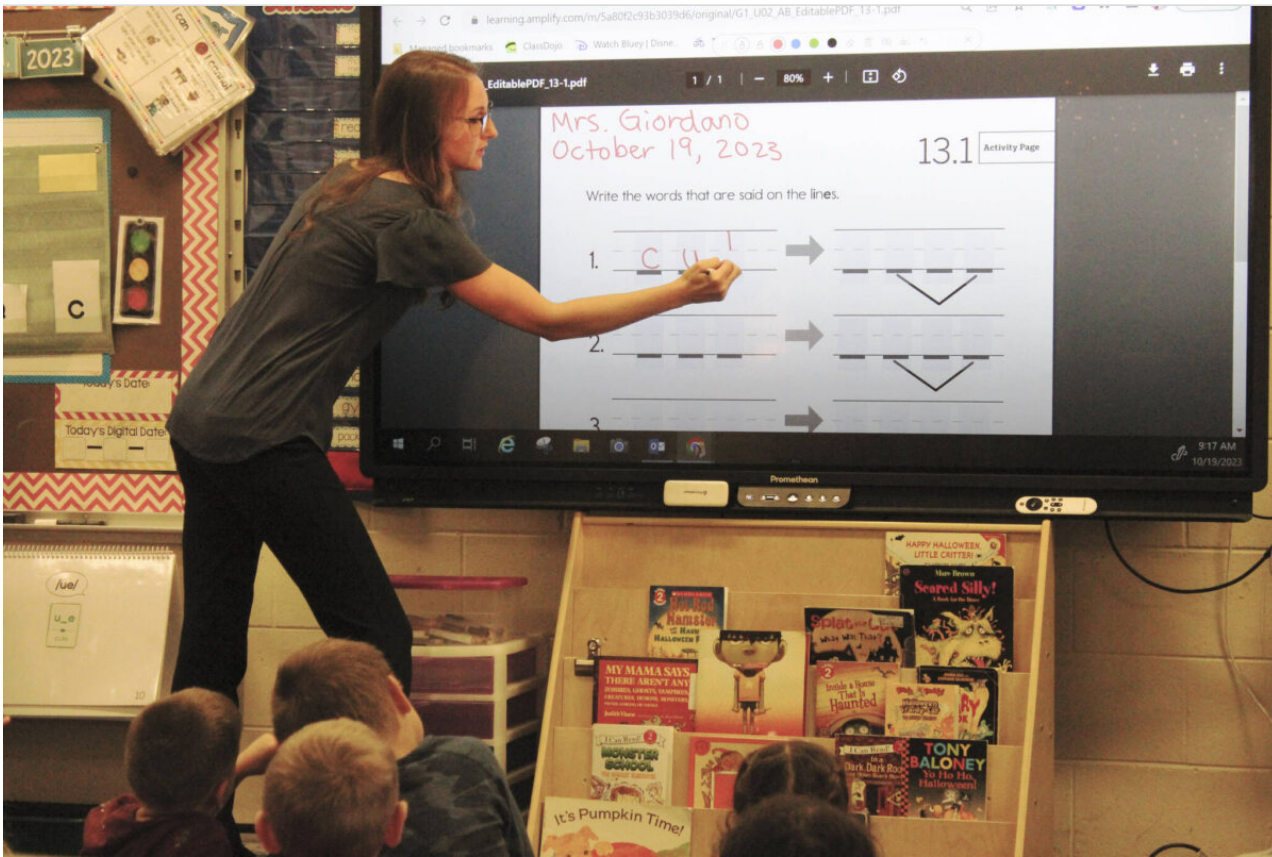
A student reads aloud from part of CKLA's Third Grade "How Does Your Body Work?" unit at Hope School on Wednesday, Oct. 18, 2023, in Hope, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Hara/Peninsula Clarion)



Materials with information about the Alaska Reads Act are displayed on a table near the entrance to Hope School on Wednesday, Oct. 18, 2023, in Hope, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Hara/Peninsula Clarion)



Jennifer Medley (left) practices literacy skills with students at Fireweed Academy on Tuesday, Oct. 17, 2023, in Homer, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Hara/Peninsula Clarion)



Mountain View Elementary School first grade teacher Callie Giordano leads her students in a literacy skills exercise on Thursday, Oct. 19, 2023, in Kenai, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Haara/Peninsula Clarion)



Callie Giordano's first grade Mountain View Elementary School students practice literacy skills on Thursday, Oct. 19, 2023, in Kenai, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Haara/Peninsula Clarion)



Mountain View Elementary School first grade teacher Kristin Perkins helps a student read aloud on Thursday, Oct. 19, 2023, in Kenai, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Haara/Peninsula Clarion)



First grade students in Barbara Ralston's class complete exercises associated with CKLA's "Gran" lessons at Mountain View Elementary School on Thursday, Oct. 19, 2023, in Kenai, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Hara/Peninsula Clarion)



Students practice finding the letter "M" during a group activity led by Mountain View Elementary School Interventionist Katie Schneider on Thursday, Oct. 19, 2023, in Kenai, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Hara/Peninsula Clarion)



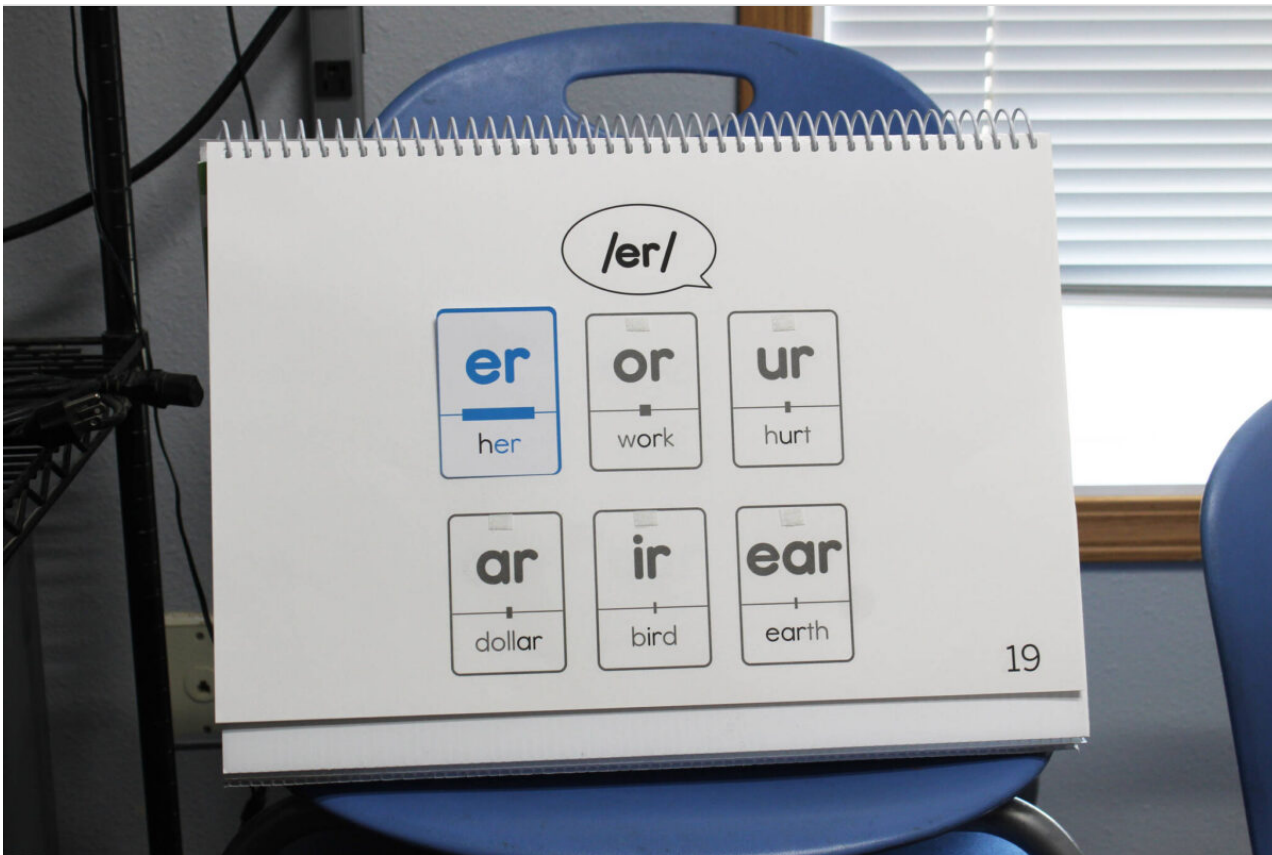
Students practice writing the letter "M" during a group activity led by Mountain View Elementary School Interventionist Katie Schneider on Thursday, Oct. 19, 2023, in Kenai, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Hara/Peninsula Clarion)



A sign marks the entrance to Razdolna School on Tuesday Oct. 24, 2023, in Razdolna, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Hara/Peninsula Clarion)



An Amplify CKLA book rests on Principal Dr. Mike Sturm's desk at Razdolna School on Tuesday, Oct. 24, 2023, in Razdolna, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Hara/Peninsula Clarion)



An Amplify CKLA flip book shows different ways to pronounce the sound /er/ inside Razdolna School Principal Dr. Mike Sturm's office on Tuesday, Oct. 24, 2023, in Razdolna, Alaska. (Ashlyn O'Hara/Peninsula Clarion)



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