Read to Succeed Buffalo (RTSB), convener of the Buffalo Literacy Coalition has been focusing on the challenges of illiteracy in our community for nearly a decade. The mission of RTSB is to be a community convener and advocate on behalf of young children, support and align similar agencies in our work, and promote supportive early literacy policies and practices to enhance academic achievement and third grade reading success. We are committed to filling the void of evidence-based early literacy practice and advocacy for Buffalo’s children through the entire early childhood developmental continuum – knitting together a fabric of appropriate, intentional practices that not only prepare young children to succeed in school but prepares the community and the early grades to build on that leaning.

What does it mean to fill the void of evidence based literacy practice? It means supporting teachers who work with young children – regardless of the modality of care - with on-site, professionally embedded literacy coaching and professional development supports that help them to utilize assessment data, individualize instruction and maximize and track outcomes for the children in their care. It means integrating science-based reading research instructional strategies and materials to emphasize the five dimensions of emergent literacy development including alphabet knowledge, language development, vocabulary, phonological awareness, and print awareness in child care and preschool programs. It also means integrating science based reading research instructional strategies and materials that emphasize the five predictors of early reading success, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary in Kindergarten through third grade. And finally it means supporting these practices and assessments consistently throughout the child’s early years by communicating and engaging parents in the process every step of the way by articulating their child’s developmental progression in easily understood and consistent ways.

In Buffalo implementing these literacy coaching supports is particularly urgent. District wide there is a pronounced decline in performance on literacy assessments as children move from Kindergarten through third grade – culminating in 75 percent of students not reaching proficiency on the NYS English Language Arts exam by the fourth grade (see attachment 1) Our hypothesis is that children in low achieving schools are not receiving the benefits of individualized instruction because teachers
are not receiving the supports they need to appropriately utilize assessment data nor do they have the supports in the classroom to effectively facilitate small group instruction.

Further supporting the need for on-site professionally embedded literacy coaching supports from early childhood through third grade can be found in the BPS Joint Intervention Team reports describing practices in Persistently Low Achieving (PLA) schools in the district. Major findings include: a) no evidence of differentiation of instruction for students b) activities that were often inappropriate and/or all the same for all students c) children who were off task and unsure of what to do d) no evidence of instruction in the concepts of basic letter formation, basic language skills, grammar and conventions e) minimal evidence that attention is given to using data to guide instructional practices...teachers report that they do not know what to do as a result of receiving data or how it correlates to their performance as a teacher.

Individualized instruction is critical for all children but even more critical for low-income English Language Learners. Effectively educating these students requires diagnosing each student instructionally, adjusting instruction accordingly and closely monitoring student progress. (From Common Core State Standards-Application for English Learners)

RTSB’s credibility for successfully implementing early learning strategies that support emergent literacy skills in young children birth through age five and the predictors of reading success in young children age five through eight was established in three ways: 1) The foundation for our literacy coaching expertise was developed and incubated through a four year partnership with the USDOE and our successful implementation of Early Reading First; 2) RTSB has been in the field for four years, building on a program originally developed by the United Way Success By 6 initiative, to increase the quality of home based child care in urban neighborhoods. This child care quality improvement program was developed in response to providers’ desire to measurably increase quality but inability to afford national accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The RTSB quality improvement project utilizes environmental rating scales and on-site coaching and professional development supports consistent with New York state’s quality rating and improvement initiatives, but adds an intentional literacy and child assessment dynamic as well to maximize the development of emergent literacy skills; 3) RTSB has successfully aligned these two established, successful strategies into a continuum of consistent assessment, observation and parental support strategies under the 2011 Buffalo Promise Neighborhood Implementation (USDOE)grant currently servicing children and families on Buffalo’s east side.
Goals for this continuum of high quality early learning supports include significantly increasing DIBELS scores annually and doubling third grade English Language Arts scores in SY 2016-17.

Research shows that with exposure to high quality, intentional, literacy rich, environments from birth through age eight, all children and families, regardless of economic or social challenges, can reach their highest potential. RTSB, and the Literacy Coalition, strongly urge Governor Andrew Cuomo and the NYS Education Reform Committee, to support innovative programs that provide a customized and consistent path for diverse learners, professional coaching support for teachers and consistent communication to parents as their child’s first and most consistent literacy teacher birth through third grade. Creating and implementing this aligned, data driven system of early care and education, creates the accountability structures that can ensure children receive the individual supports they need to learn to read so they can flourish in the early grades and read to learn by fourth grade (see attachment 2).