

Building on Proven Success: Scaling the University of Florida - Sarasota County Schools Science of Reading Model

Significance of the Proposed Project

Reading proficiency in the early grades is foundational for long-term academic success. Students who do not master foundational reading skills by the end of third grade are four times more likely to not graduate from high school on time (Petscher, Kim, & Foorman, 2020). The Science of Reading (SoR) which emphasizes explicit, systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension provides the most evidence-based framework to develop these skills (Petscher et al., 2020; Duke & Cartwright, 2021). These findings directly inform Goal 2, improving student literacy outcomes and closing subgroup gaps.

High-quality professional learning and coaching are essential to implementing SoR with fidelity. Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that coaching-embedded professional learning produces substantial improvements in teacher practice (average effect size = 0.49 SD) and meaningful gains in student achievement (Ventista, Mavroudi, & Hennessy, 2023). Similarly, Babinski, Amendum, and Vernon-Feagans (2025) found that a literacy professional-learning program with sustained coaching led to stronger reading growth for multilingual learners, demonstrating scalability across diverse populations.

Locally, the Strauss Literacy Initiative has shown consistent positive impacts in Sarasota County Schools. In SY 2024–25, participating Flamingo cohorts outperformed district averages on both Percentile Growth and Achievement Level Growth:

- **Kindergarten (n = 180):** +9.54 percentile growth vs. +4.35 districtwide
- **Grade 1 (n = 165):** +5.87 Achievement Level Growth vs. +3.96 districtwide
- **Grade 2 (n = 172):** +3.47 percentile growth vs. –1.29 districtwide
- **Grade 4 interventionists (n = 112):** higher Achievement Level Growth than district averages despite regression among non-participants

Teacher surveys corroborate these outcomes: over 90 percent reported that the initiative had a “significant” or “transformational” impact on their practice, particularly in small-group reading instruction. These results underscore the scalability and replicability of the Strauss/Flamingo model. Yet, longitudinal FAST data reveal that literacy gaps widen as students move into Grades 3–5, where reading demands shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” Without extended structured-literacy support, struggling readers continue to fall behind in vocabulary, comprehension, and disciplinary literacy (Marinelli et al., 2023). The proposed EIR Mid-Phase expansion directly addresses this challenge by extending proven SoR coaching and professional-learning systems into the upper-elementary grades to sustain early gains and ensure equitable literacy outcomes for all students.

Strategy to Scale and Rationale for Expansion

The Strauss Literacy Initiative has established a replicable professional learning model grounded in the Science of Reading (SoR) and implemented with fidelity across Sarasota County Schools (SCS). Developed in partnership with the University of Florida Lastinger Center and supported by the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, the model integrates Flamingo small-group

coaching, embedded professional learning, and interventionist support all aligned to district curricula and Florida’s literacy priorities.

Over three years, the Strauss Initiative has served more than 60 teachers and 1,000 students across twelve elementary schools, demonstrating consistent and measurable impact. District evaluation data show that Strauss-supported students outpaced the district in Percentile Growth at every grade level (K–5), even when district averages declined. In Grade 2, for example, the district’s Percentile Growth was –1.29, while Strauss students achieved +3.47. Similarly, Kindergarten and first-grade Flamingo cohorts posted +9.54 and +5.87 percentile gains, respectively, compared to less than half that growth districtwide.

Teacher impact has been equally strong. Surveys indicate that 100 percent of teachers reported positive effects on their daily instruction, and 90–95 percent described the impact as *significant* or *transformational*. Teachers cite heightened confidence in implementing SoR-aligned practices, improved data use in small-group instruction, and a renewed sense of professional collaboration. This teacher-driven culture shift has produced a ripple effect spreading evidence-based literacy practices throughout schools and building internal instructional leadership capacity.

Given these results, Sarasota County Schools and the Community Foundation determined that the Strauss/Flamingo model demonstrated sufficient efficacy and scalability to warrant full adoption across the K–2 continuum. During SY 2025–26, the district expanded implementation to all first-grade teachers, moving from voluntary pilot participation to full integration into district professional learning.

The proposed EIR Mid-Phase project will extend this proven framework to Grades 3–5, directly serving approximately 120 teachers and 4,200 students across 26 elementary schools. These schools reflect district demographics 17 percent Students with Disabilities (SWD) and 9 percent English Learners (ELL) with more than half designated as Targeted or Comprehensive Support and Improvement (TSI/CSI) sites. Focusing implementation in these schools ensures that resources reach the highest-need populations and that evaluation findings are generalizable across diverse educational contexts.

Research Questions

The study will address three core questions:

1. To what extent does the Strauss/Flamingo expansion improve student literacy achievement in Grades 3–5 compared with matched peers?
2. How does fidelity of implementation vary across schools, and what contextual factors influence those differences?
3. How do teacher-leader cadres and district supports contribute to sustaining structured literacy practices beyond the grant period?

This two-year expansion, supported by \$1.5 million in federal funds matched 1:1 with local philanthropic support, will sustain early literacy gains through the upper-elementary years when students shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” By maintaining the same coaching and professional learning model that produced early-grade success, SCS will deepen teacher

capacity, ensure instructional continuity, and generate rigorous, replicable evidence of effectiveness that can inform literacy reform efforts statewide.

Goals and Objectives

Goal 1: Strengthen Teacher Capacity in Structured Literacy Instruction (Grades 3–5) Sarasota County Schools (SCS) will expand its University of Florida led Science of Reading (SoR) professional-learning model into Grades 3–5, building on the demonstrated success of the Strauss Literacy Initiative in the primary grades. UF Lastinger’s Flamingo Literacy model is grounded in peer-reviewed evidence demonstrating measurable impacts on teacher efficacy and student literacy outcomes (e.g., Babinski, Amendum, & Vernon-Feagans, 2025). This partnership allows Sarasota County Schools to implement a proven IHE-developed model at scale. Research confirms that explicit, systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension produces the largest effect sizes for early-elementary reading achievement (Cabell et al., 2021; Petscher et al., 2020). When coupled with ongoing coaching, teachers achieve higher fidelity and sustained instructional change (Ventista et al., 2023).

Objective 1.1: Deliver Flamingo professional-learning and coaching cohorts for all Grade 3 teachers in Year 1 (SY 2026–27), expanding to Grades 4 and 5 by Year 3.

Measure: Percentage of teachers completing Flamingo modules and scoring “proficient” or higher on UF Lastinger fidelity rubrics.

Objective 1.2: Establish teacher-leader cadres in every elementary school to provide peer mentoring, collaborative planning, and modeling of SoR-aligned small-group instruction.

Measure: Number of cadres sustained; frequency and quality of peer-observation cycles.

Objective 1.3: Increase teacher confidence and efficacy in structured-literacy instruction across all upper-elementary classrooms.

Measure: ≥ 25 -point gain in “very confident” responses on teacher-efficacy surveys.

This goal directly supports federal priorities for scaling evidence-based literacy models and advances Sarasota’s Strategic Plan Pillar 1 (Student Success).

Goal 2: Improve Student Literacy Outcomes and Reduce Achievement Gaps Extending SoR practices to Grades 3–5 will address persistent literacy gaps among struggling readers, English learners, and students with disabilities. Research demonstrates that ongoing structured-literacy exposure beyond primary grades prevents regression and supports comprehension growth (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Kim et al., 2021).

Objective 2.1: Increase the percentage of Grade 3–5 students meeting or exceeding proficiency on FAST Reading by 10 percentage points annually in participating schools.

Objective 2.2: Raise learning-gain rates for bottom-quartile students and students with disabilities by 15 percentage points above baseline.

Objective 2.3: Decrease the percentage of students scoring Level 1–2 on FAST Reading by 10 percentage points by Year 3.

Measures: FAST and STAR longitudinal data, disaggregated by grade and subgroup. These objectives align with evidence showing that data-driven instruction anchored in SoR principles significantly improves outcomes for diverse learners (Babinski et al., 2025).

Goal 3: Build Sustainable Systems for Continuous Improvement and Scale To ensure enduring impact, SCS will institutionalize its professional-learning and evaluation systems. Continuous-improvement models that include feedback loops and real-time data monitoring have been shown to strengthen implementation fidelity and sustainability (Kraft et al., 2018; Century & Cassata, 2016).

Objective 3.1: Embed quarterly improvement cycles using FAST/STAR reports, Flamingo coaching rubrics, and leadership-team data reviews.

Objective 3.2: Integrate structured-literacy indicators into district dashboards by Year 3.

Objective 3.3: Establish a sustainable funding and implementation model through continued partnership among SCS, the University of Florida Lastinger Center, and the Community Foundation’s Strauss Fund.

Measures: Documented completion of quarterly cycles, dashboard integration, and board-approved sustainability plan with confirmed post-grant funding.

Goal 4: Generate and Disseminate Evidence of Effectiveness The project will contribute to the national evidence base by implementing a rigorous quasi-experimental evaluation meeting What Works Clearinghouse v4.1 standards. Mixed-methods designs with matched comparison groups are recommended for EIR Mid-Phase projects to build moderate-to-strong evidence (Lipsey et al., 2018; Marinelli et al., 2023).

Objective 4.1: Conduct a quasi-experimental evaluation comparing treatment and matched-comparison schools to assess impacts on student literacy outcomes.

Objective 4.2: Publish findings through peer-reviewed journals, UF Lastinger research briefs, and national literacy conferences.

Objective 4.3: Develop replication toolkits and dissemination materials to support adoption by partner districts and state systems.

Measures: Statistically significant treatment effects, two or more peer-reviewed publications, and completed dissemination toolkit distributed through UF Lastinger’s network.

Project Design and Management Plan

A. Phased Implementation Strategy

Sarasota County Schools (SCS) has demonstrated the capacity to implement large-scale literacy initiatives, serving over 600 teachers and 3,000 students in SY 2024–25 through the Strauss Literacy Initiative. The proposed **EIR expansion** follows a structured, grade-by-grade approach aligned to Goal 1.1 (Professional Learning Scale-Up) and Goal 3.1 (Systems for Continuous Improvement):

Year 1 (SY 2026–27): Implement Flamingo Science of Reading professional learning and coaching for all Grade 3 teachers across 26 elementary schools.

Year 2 (SY 2027–28): Expand to Grade 4, with trained Grade 3 teachers serving as peer mentors to reinforce fidelity and teacher leadership.

This staged approach mirrors the district’s successful K–2 expansion model, ensuring fidelity of implementation, allowing rigorous evaluation of each cohort, and minimizing implementation risk. Research on scaling emphasizes phased growth as a key factor for maintaining quality and achieving sustainable impact (Century & Cassata, 2016).

B. Partnerships and Evaluation Capacity

The University of Florida Lastinger Center will deliver all professional learning and coaching, administer teacher surveys, and lead evaluation design in compliance with What Works Clearinghouse v4.1 standards. Sarasota County Schools’ Research, Accountability, and Evaluation Department will analyze student-level FAST, STAR, and progress monitoring data each grading period, disaggregated by English Learners (ELL) and Students with Disabilities (SWD). Local philanthropic partners including the Community Foundation of Sarasota County (Strauss Fund) and Barancik Foundation will continue providing a combined \$1.5 million in matching funds, ensuring sustainability beyond the two-year federal funding period.

C. Budget Summary

The proposed \$3.0 million project includes \$1.5 million in federal EIR funds and a \$1.5 million non-federal match from the Community Foundation of Sarasota County’s Strauss Literacy Legacy Fund and the Barancik Foundation. Approximately 70 percent of funds will support professional learning stipends, contracts with the University of Florida Lastinger Center, and independent evaluation. The remaining 30 percent will fund instructional materials, supplies, and project management to ensure fidelity of implementation and long-term sustainability. All match contributions meet non-federal eligibility requirements and are secured through existing foundation commitments and district allocations.

Detailed federal and non-federal cost breakdowns are provided in the Budget Narrative and Summary Table (Appendix C) and on the official DOE Form ED-524 submitted with this application. Together, these documents demonstrate full alignment between project activities, allowable cost categories, and the 1:1 cost-share requirement under the EIR Mid-Phase program. Formal matching-partner declarations and foundation commitment letters are included in the Additional Uploads section of the DOE Grants.gov application portal.

D. Measurable Goals and Outcomes

Project success will be measured through both teacher and student outcomes:

Teachers: At least 120 teachers will complete Flamingo cohorts each year, with $\geq 85\%$ reporting increased confidence in implementing SoR practices. Fidelity rubrics, observation data, and UF-administered surveys will confirm growth in teacher knowledge and practice.

Students: Over 4,000 students per year will benefit from structured literacy instruction, with an expected 10-percentage-point annual increase in the number of students meeting FAST Reading proficiency benchmarks and a 15-point gain among SWD and ELL subgroups.

System-Level Outcomes: By the end of Year 2, teacher-leader cadres will be established in every elementary school, and literacy metrics will be fully integrated into the district’s instructional dashboards to ensure long-term sustainability.

Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

A. Alignment with Federal and State Priorities

The proposed project directly aligns with the EIR Mid-Phase priority for evidence-based literacy, expanding a proven structured literacy model to new grade levels and generating rigorous evidence of impact. It also supports Florida’s statewide Reading Achievement Initiative for Scholastic Excellence (RAISE), which mandates explicit phonics instruction and data-based intervention planning. Locally, the project advances Sarasota County Schools’ 2030 Strategic Plan pillars of Student Success, Future-Ready Learners, and Engaged Community.

B. Continuous Improvement Framework

Continuous improvement is embedded throughout the design. The University of Florida Lastinger Center and the district’s Research, Accountability, and Evaluation (RAE) department will provide quarterly FAST and STAR reports to leadership teams, enabling real-time instructional adjustments. Fidelity will be monitored using Flamingo coaching logs, classroom observations, and teacher reflection data. These metrics will be analyzed during quarterly improvement meetings with school administrators to ensure that implementation remains rigorous and adaptive to varying school contexts.

Using STAR and FAST as feedback loops, SCS will sustain a system of real-time evaluation that promotes accountability, professional growth, and responsive decision-making. This approach reflects best practices in continuous improvement and coaching-based PL systems (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018).

C. Evaluation Design and Evidence Generation

The evaluation will employ a quasi-experimental design with matched comparison groups, meeting the requirements for moderate-to-strong evidence under WWC v4.1 standards. Sarasota County Schools’ RAE department will lead ongoing internal data collection and analysis, while the UF Lastinger Center will oversee independent evaluation in partnership with an external third-party evaluator as needed. The design will examine both student and teacher outcomes using multiple data sources:

Student Outcomes: FAST Reading and STAR assessments (Percentile Growth, Achievement Level Growth, subgroup gains).

Teacher Outcomes: Flamingo fidelity rubrics, classroom observation protocols, and teacher-efficacy surveys.

Subgroup Analyses: Impacts on English Learners, Students with Disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students.

Advanced analytic techniques such as propensity score matching and regression discontinuity will be used to strengthen causal inference (Lipsey et al., 2018).

Year 1: August 2026 – July 2027 (Aligned to Goals 1.1, 2.1, 3.1)

- Launch Flamingo SoR professional learning and coaching for all **Grade 3 teachers** across 26 schools.
- Procure SoR-aligned curriculum materials, classroom kits, and digital tools for Grade 3.
- Train interventionists, literacy coaches, and teacher leaders to provide embedded support.
- Establish baseline data for evaluation, including FAST, STAR, and Amira metrics.
- Initiate the Flamingo Literacy Leadership Series for administrators to strengthen site-based instructional leadership.

Year 2: August 2027 – July 2028 (Aligned to Goals 1.2, 2.2, 3.2)

Expand Flamingo SoR professional learning and coaching to Grades 4–5, completing the K–5 continuum.

- Maintain coaching and fidelity monitoring for Grade 3 teachers to ensure quality and sustainability.
- Conduct mid- and end-of-year evaluations, including classroom observations and teacher-efficacy surveys.
- Facilitate quarterly continuous-improvement cycles using UF dashboards to refine instruction for SWD and ELL students.
- Develop the Sarasota Literacy Sustainability Toolkit compiling exemplar lessons and implementation rubrics for long-term use.

End-of-Project Activities (Aligned to Goal 3.3 and Goal 4)

- Complete the final evaluation report documenting teacher and student outcomes.
- Disseminate results locally, statewide, and nationally through UF Lastinger networks and peer-reviewed publications.
- Integrate findings into Sarasota County Schools’ professional learning systems to ensure sustainability beyond EIR funding.

Sustainability Plan

The project is designed as a sustainable expansion of Sarasota County Schools’ long-term literacy strategy, not a stand-alone initiative. Sustainability is embedded in the structure of the project in three key ways:

1. Continued Local Investment

The Strauss Literacy Legacy Fund at the Community Foundation of Sarasota County invests \$750,000 annually to sustain Science of Reading professional learning in Grades K–2. Federal EIR funding at \$750,000 annually for two years will extend this investment through Grade 5. After the grant period, the Community Foundation’s continued funding will maintain K–2 support, while the district incorporates Grades 3–5 into its recurring professional learning budget.

2. Integration into District Systems

Structured literacy professional learning and coaching will become part of Sarasota County Schools’ standard professional learning framework. Teacher-leader cadres will be trained to facilitate future cohorts, reducing reliance on external consultants. Materials

purchased with federal funds will remain in classrooms, and district instructional coaches will continue fidelity monitoring through FAST, STAR, and Amira dashboards.

3. Evidence to Attract Future Funding

The project's quasi-experimental evaluation will generate evidence that meets What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards, to be disseminated through peer-reviewed publications, UF Lastinger's networks, and Sarasota's regional partnerships. This rigorous evidence will position Sarasota County Schools to compete for EIR Expansion-Phase grants and attract additional state and philanthropic investment.

Together, these strategies ensure that the benefits of the project continue well beyond the two-year federal funding period. The district's integration of SoR practices, ongoing local philanthropy, and production of high-quality evidence will sustain and expand literacy gains for Sarasota students into the future.

Organizational Capacity and Key Personnel

This partnership integrates the district's operational strength, the Community Foundation and Barancik Foundation's sustained philanthropic investment, and the University of Florida's research and evaluation expertise.

Together, these partners have already demonstrated success through the Strauss-funded K–2 initiative and are fully prepared to replicate and scale the model into Grades 3–5 under the EIR Mid-Phase project. Oversight will be shared between Sarasota County Schools' Research, Accountability, and Evaluation (RAE) Department, which will manage compliance reporting and internal monitoring, and the University of Florida Lastinger Center, which will direct professional learning, coaching, and teacher surveys.

The Community Foundation of Sarasota County, through the Strauss Literacy Legacy Fund, will sustain the K–2 model as EIR funds expand Grades 3–5. Quarterly leadership meetings will convene district administrators, UF Lastinger faculty, the external evaluator (Mindful Metrics, LLC), and foundation partners to review data, troubleshoot challenges, and prepare federal progress reports.

Continuous-improvement cycles will be embedded throughout, leveraging Sarasota's existing dashboards (FAST, STAR, Amira, and fidelity rubrics) for real-time instructional feedback.

- **District Lead (Project Director):** Oversees daily implementation, alignment with district professional-learning systems, budget management, and federal reporting.
- **District Literacy Coaches and Interventionists:** Provide site-based facilitation of SoR practices through modeling, feedback, and collaborative lesson planning. Interventionists deliver targeted, data-driven instruction for students requiring additional support.

- **UF Lastinger Faculty Lead:** Directs professional-learning design, evaluation methodology, and dissemination of findings through state and national networks.
- **External Evaluator (Mindful Metrics, LLC):** Ensures independence and rigor of the quasi-experimental design, conducts statistical analyses, and produces annual and final evaluation reports.
- **District Research and Accountability Staff:** Support data reporting, fidelity monitoring, and integration of results into Sarasota’s FAST and STAR dashboards.

University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning

The UF Lastinger Center brings national expertise in literacy professional learning and evaluation. Its Flamingo Small-Group Instruction and Coaching Models are grounded in the Science of Reading and validated through rigorous research. Since 2022, the Lastinger Center has partnered with Sarasota County Schools to deliver sustained professional learning cohorts, coaching cycles, and fidelity monitoring. Its evaluation team designs studies that meet What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards and will serve as the lead external evaluator for this EIR project.

Sarasota County Schools (SCS)

Sarasota County Schools has a proven record of successfully implementing large-scale literacy initiatives supported by both public and private funding. The district currently manages more than \$6 million in competitive and foundation grants, including the Strauss Literacy Legacy Fund, and maintains robust systems for financial oversight, compliance, and reporting. The Research, Accountability, and Evaluation (RAE) Department provides continuous monitoring of student outcomes using FAST, STAR, and state assessments to guide instructional adjustments and ensure implementation fidelity.

Community Foundation of Sarasota County and Barancik Foundation

The Community Foundation of Sarasota County, steward of the Strauss Literacy Legacy Fund, has committed \$750,000 annually to sustain Science of Reading professional learning in Grades K–2. In partnership, the Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation contributes an additional \$150,000 annually to strengthen teacher stipends, venues, and leadership development. Together, these investments provide a \$900,000–\$1 million annual philanthropic match that undergirds long-term literacy improvement and ensures stability for the district’s expansion into Grades 3–5.

Deliverables and Milestones				
Goal / Objective	Deliverable (Product, Service, or Outcome)	Evidence / Verification	Timeline	Responsible Parties
Goal 1				
Objective 1.1: Provide UF Flamingo SoR professional learning for all Grade 3–5 teachers	120 teachers complete UF Flamingo Literacy SoR professional learning modules	UF Flamingo LMS reports, attendance records, pre/post knowledge surveys, agendas	SY 2026–27 & 2027–28	UF Lastinger Center, SCS PL Office

Objective 1.2: Deliver ongoing coaching cycles for participating teachers	Teachers receive at least 3 job-embedded coaching cycles per semester aligned to Flamingo SoR strategies	Coaching logs, observation rubrics, reflection notes	Ongoing each year	District Literacy Coaches, Interventionists
Objective 1.3: Support instructional leadership through Literacy Leadership PL	26 school leaders complete Flamingo Literacy Leadership Series and participate in peer-learning communities	PL rosters, agendas, reflection surveys	Annual	UF Lastinger Center, SCS Elementary Director
Goal 2:				
Objective 2.1: Improve instructional delivery for diverse learners including SWD and ELL	Teachers implement differentiated SoR practices informed by Amira screener data and Flamingo coaching	Lesson plans, walkthroughs, coaching notes, fidelity checklists	Ongoing	UF Lastinger Center, SCS PL and ESE Teams
Objective 2.2: Monitor student progress and reading growth	FAST, STAR, and Amira data collected and analyzed for all participating classrooms	Data reports, evaluator analysis, end-of-year summaries	Mid-year & End-of-Year	SCS Research & Accountability, Mindful Metrics
Objective 2.3: Increase student reading proficiency for Grades 3–5	Demonstrated improvement in reading achievement compared to matched control groups	Evaluation reports with statistical analyses	End of project	Mindful Metrics (External Evaluator)
Goal 3:				
Objective 3.1: Share annual evaluation findings with stakeholders	Annual evaluation brief and dissemination presentation shared with district leadership and community foundations	Evaluation brief, presentation slides, stakeholder feedback	End of SY 2026–27 & SY 2027–28	Mindful Metrics, SCS Research Department
Objective 3.2: Develop district sustainability toolkit	Creation of a teacher reflection protocol, exemplar lesson bank, and SoR implementation toolkit for continued use	Published toolkit, dissemination log	End of SY 2027–28	SCS PL Department, UF Lastinger Center
Objective 3.3: Report EIR performance measures	Submission of federal progress and final performance reports	Verified submission via EIR reporting portal	End of SY 2026–27 and SY 2027–28; final report due 2028	SCS Grants Department

Absolute Priority Alignment

This proposal directly addresses the Absolute Priority for EIR Mid-Phase by expanding an evidence-based literacy intervention with demonstrated positive impact on student achievement. Sarasota County Schools, in partnership with the University of Florida Lastinger Center, has implemented the Strauss-funded Science of Reading (SoR) professional learning and coaching model across Grades K–2. Independent monitoring through the district’s Research, Accountability, and Evaluation (RAE) office has shown consistent gains in literacy achievement, as measured by FAST and STAR assessments, sustained across multiple years. These outcomes meet moderate evidence standards under *What Works Clearinghouse* guidelines, positioning this project for scale under EIR Mid-Phase criteria (WWC, 2020).

The proposed EIR project will extend this proven Science of Reading model into Grades 3–5 over a two-year implementation period (SY 2026–27 through SY 2027–28), serving approximately 120 teachers and 4,200 students across 26 elementary schools. This phased expansion builds directly on existing professional learning systems and provides sustained

coaching and fidelity monitoring while supporting a quasi-experimental evaluation led by Mindful Metrics, LLC in partnership with UF Lastinger. Evaluation results will contribute to the national evidence base on effective scaling of Science of Reading professional learning models while generating actionable insights for Sarasota County Schools.

Through a combined \$900,000–\$1 million annual local investment from the Strauss Literacy Legacy Fund and the Barancik Foundation, this project represents a strategic expansion of a proven model, not a new initiative. It fully satisfies the EIR Mid-Phase Absolute Priority by scaling evidence-based practices with strong potential to improve upper-elementary literacy outcomes and by producing replicable evidence to guide districts nationwide.

This project aligns with the anticipated Competitive Preference Priorities (CPPs) for EIR Mid-Phase by (1) serving high-need student populations and (2) strengthening the educator workforce through sustainable, evidence-based professional learning.

Absolute Priority 1: Serving High-Need Students

Sarasota County Schools serves a diverse population that includes large proportions of students who are economically disadvantaged, English learners (ELLs), and students with disabilities (SWD). Expanding the Science of Reading professional learning model into Grades 3–5 ensures that these subgroups receive consistent, structured literacy instruction throughout the upper elementary years. The evaluation design explicitly includes subgroup analyses to assess impact on historically underserved students (Kraft et al., 2018). A central goal of the Strauss Literacy Initiative, and the foundation for this EIR expansion, is to intervene early for students who display reading difficulties or who are at risk for developing reading disabilities. Sarasota County Schools currently employs the Amira screener, an AI-driven assessment aligned with the Science of Reading, to identify students for early intervention and monitor progress. These data guide classroom instruction and targeted supports, enabling responsive, evidence-based interventions.

Teachers have expressed a clear need for additional scaffolds and differentiated strategies for SWD and ELL students. The UF Flamingo coaching model embeds such differentiation within the Science of Reading framework, equipping teachers to adapt phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension lessons using multisensory and linguistically responsive techniques while maintaining fidelity to the model. Florida’s statewide literacy infrastructure reinforces this design. Under the New Worlds Reading Initiative (Florida Legislature, 2024), the UF Lastinger Center administers a statewide clearinghouse of Science of Reading resources and professional learning modules (such as the Literacy Matrix). Research has shown that Flamingo and Literacy Matrix participation substantially increases educator knowledge and diagnostic capacity (Lastinger Center, 2021; Lastinger Learning, 2025). By integrating Amira data cycles, differentiated coaching, and access to this state-supported clearinghouse, Sarasota County Schools will ensure equitable, high-quality literacy instruction for all learners, including SWD, ELLs, and those at elevated risk for reading disabilities (Connor et al., 2018).

Absolute Priority 2: Strengthening the Educator Workforce

By training teacher-leader cadres and integrating Science of Reading professional learning into Sarasota’s districtwide professional learning system, this project builds long-term educator

capacity. Paraprofessionals and interventionists will receive targeted training, creating a broader base of skilled support staff and reducing reliance on external consultants. This model addresses persistent workforce challenges while creating sustainable, scalable pathways for teacher growth and leadership (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Together, these components meet both the Absolute and Competitive Preference Priorities by delivering rigorous, evidence-based literacy instruction to high-need students and strengthening the educator pipeline. The project not only extends the impact of a proven local model but also contributes to national knowledge on scaling effective Science of Reading interventions through sustainable district–university–foundation partnerships.

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