

# Project Narrative (Mid-Phase)

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## Introduction

The American Institutes for Research® (AIR®), in collaboration with Ancora Publishing (“Ancora”), proposes a mid-phase grant focused on **Scaling and Evaluating the Impact of The Third Quest (TTQ)**. Aligned to college- and career-ready grade-level standards, TTQ is a Tier 2 small-group reading intervention for students in Grades 5–8 who are reading below grade level. Students who are reading below grade level are striving to develop their reading skills; in this proposal, we use asset-based language and refer to these students as “striving readers.” To date, TTQ has been used nationwide to support more than 8,900 striving readers in increasing their reading skills.

TTQ, which consists of 75 lessons delivered by Ancora-trained teachers or reading specialists (hereafter “instructors”) in Tier 2 intervention groups, has a **consistent emphasis on evidence-based practices (EBPs) to promote literacy skills for striving adolescent readers**, including foundational phonics skills, multisyllabic words, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Drawing on informational and narrative texts as well as multimedia resources, TTQ uses **strategies that build background knowledge** in content areas important for secondary coursework. To provide a more comprehensive level of support for striving adolescent readers, TTQ integrates **motivational strategies that enable academic progress, including the use of positive behavioral supports and social and emotional supports**. During TTQ’s 75 lessons (each 50–60 minutes in length), groups of 6–10 students per instructor participate in choral word study practice to decode multisyllabic words; complete repeated reading practice with partners to increase oral reading fluency; read relevant and engaging narrative fiction text that reinforces taught vocabulary and builds motivation and content knowledge; and complete written quizzes to assess their understanding of the material. These lessons take place in a supportive, positive, identity-safe, and inclusive intervention setting that immerses students in a fictional story about a diverse group of adolescents with relatable life experiences.

Following 2 years of interrupted schooling, educators need interventions that address student needs in a more comprehensive and integrated way. Adolescent students need reading skills and

sufficient content knowledge to help prevent the lifelong consequences of low literacy. TTQ provides an innovative alternative to typical adolescent reading interventions that focus on building reading proficiency but lack engaging content or explicit supports that address the decreased motivation commonly experienced by striving adolescent readers after years of insufficient reading instruction. Additionally, the training and instructor materials for TTQ provide sufficient implementation support to enable a wide range of instructors to deliver the program, including those without extensive backgrounds in reading instruction. The overarching goal of the project is to understand whether TTQ is an effective solution for the pressing problem facing so many educators and administrators at the middle school level: how best to accelerate reading proficiency for striving adolescent readers. The project aims to do this by implementing TTQ in new and diverse settings (e.g., various-sized districts across multiple states), using purposeful strategies to scale implementation across settings, and evaluating its effectiveness and learning lessons for future implementation.

### **Absolute and Competitive Preference Priorities**

This proposed project addresses **Absolute Priority 1—Moderate Evidence** by scaling and testing TTQ. Rigorous research has demonstrated that the program’s key components meet What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards for moderate to strong evidence (see Appendix J.2 and Evidence Form). These components include (a) explicit instruction in decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, (b) building background knowledge using content-rich texts, and (c) increasing student motivation through the use of positive behavioral supports, social and emotional supports, and high-interest texts. This project also addresses **Absolute Priority 4—Field-Initiated Innovations—Meeting Student Social, Emotional, and Academic Needs**, as it uses engaging narrative fiction and informational texts, alongside positive behavior and social emotional supports, to build reading motivation and reading skills among striving adolescent readers. The development of reading motivation and reading skills will help students to succeed and belong in school across all subjects, not just in English language arts classrooms. Finally, through a partnership with a community college chosen from a call for applications from a state intermediary partner, the project

will address **Competitive Preference Priority—Promoting Equity in Student Access to Educational Resources and Opportunities: Implementers and Partners**. Community college programs in social work and related fields serve many students from underrepresented backgrounds with an interest and expertise in the development of high-needs youth, and these students will serve as thought partners in developing relevant, engaging, and culturally responsive strategies to ensure that TTQ serves the social-emotional needs of the students who could benefit most from it.

## **A. Significance**

### **A1. Demonstration of Promising Strategies That Build on Existing Strategies**

**Reading proficiency and motivation are essential for success in secondary grades.** Secondary learning in all subjects relies on a student’s ability to read and comprehend challenging text (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). Adolescents who read below grade level will experience a variety of challenges as they progress through school and as courses become increasingly dependent on sophisticated academic texts. Students who lack grade-level decoding skills and are unable to read fluently will have trouble keeping up with the increased level of text complexity and sheer volume of independent reading required in secondary settings (Wanzek et al., 2010). Without a robust vocabulary, students will have difficulty understanding the individual words in the texts they read, which will negatively impact their reading comprehension and ability to learn grade-level content (Elleman et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2023).

Low reading comprehension and overall reading performance not only reduces a student’s ability to learn grade-level content, it also has a negative impact on motivation over time (Hebbecke et al., 2019; Toste et al., 2020). Student motivation is also described as a barrier to adolescent reading development (e.g., O’Brien et al., 2007)—which points to the interconnectedness of reading and motivation and the importance of addressing both. In the long run, both low reading motivation and poor reading performance in secondary grades are predictive of future academic difficulties, including an increased likelihood of failure to graduate (Hernandez, 2011; Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

**More middle school students are striving readers than in the period prior to the COVID-19**

**pandemic.** Unfortunately, data indicate that far too many middle school students lack proficient reading skills. The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that 30% of eighth-grade students scored “below basic” in reading (NAEP, 2022). The percentage of students scoring “below basic” was even higher for some student groups, including Black students (47%), Hispanic students (39%), students eligible for the National School Lunch Program (42%), and students with disabilities (64%). These findings indicate that improving reading skills is an important and necessary lever for schools focused on creating a more equitable educational experience for students from different racial and cultural backgrounds.

Trends in NAEP data also indicate that fewer eighth-grade students were proficient in reading after pandemic-related disruptions to schooling. Average reading scores at eighth grade in 2022 were the lowest since 1998 (NAEP, 2022). These NAEP results, combined with other recent findings related to the impacts of the pandemic on reading (i.e., Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Locke et al., 2021), indicate that adolescent students may have lost opportunities to learn some foundational skills needed for middle school reading proficiency. Disaggregated NAEP data suggests that these lost opportunities were disproportionately experienced by historically marginalized student groups—including students of color, students with disabilities, and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (NAEP, 2022).

**TTQ provides an evidence-based solution to this problem.** To support the growing number of striving readers in middle school, educators across the country need evidence-based adolescent reading interventions. However, even pre-pandemic studies on adolescent reading interventions show inconsistent effects, with many studies showing no discernible effect on literacy skills (Herrera et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2013). Although reading interventions for adolescents tend to show lower effect sizes than interventions in the elementary grades (Hall & Burns, 2018), interventions that incorporate explicit instruction, predictable instructional routines, and cooperative learning have shown greater outcomes for striving middle school readers (Herrera et al., 2016).

Three issues may explain the limited effects of most adolescent reading interventions. First, secondary interventions tend to focus less time on the fundamental skills students need to accurately

decode multisyllabic words and fluently read more complex secondary text (see Vaughn et al., 2022; Scammacca et al., 2015). Teachers at this level often lack pedagogical and content knowledge needed for effective foundational skill instruction despite research that striving adolescent readers benefit from instruction in these areas (Clemens et al., 2017). Second, interventions for adolescents typically do not focus enough time on building background knowledge needed for secondary content learning (Catts et al., 2017; O’Reilly et al., 2019). Background knowledge is important for reading comprehension because it helps students connect information within and across texts and make inferences when important information is missing in the text (Cabell & Hwang, 2020; Duke & Cartwright, 2021). As a result, students with strong background knowledge typically demonstrate better reading comprehension (Smith et al., 2021). Given the wide range of increasingly complex texts that middle school students encounter, strong background knowledge is essential. Third, few adolescent literacy interventions systematically infuse motivational supports—a missed opportunity given the research demonstrating a strong association between reading motivation and literacy, and the positive effects of motivation interventions on reading outcomes and student motivation at the elementary level (Guthrie et al., 2012; Toste et al., 2020; Van der Sande et al., 2023).

TTQ addresses these three limitations by leveraging multiple EBPs (in this case, practices with moderate to strong evidence according to WWC Practice Guides [PG]) and integrating those into one comprehensive Tier 2 intervention. Thus, TTQ is a promising intervention strategy that *builds on* a strong base of EBPs, making it exceptionally well grounded in theory and evidence, and a potential solution to educators seeking to meet the range of student literacy and motivation needs resulting from the pandemic period.

The Theory of Change (i.e., conceptual framework; described in Section C1) outlines the three previously mentioned EBPs for middle school literacy used by TTQ and supported by evidence from the WWC PG (see also Appendix J.2). The first EBP is grounded in four areas of reading: multisyllabic word decoding, fluency training, vocabulary and word study, and reading comprehension skills. Four WWC PG recommendations compose the strong evidence base for practices that target those four areas: (1) “Build students’ decoding skills so they can read complex



















meetings with appropriate partners and team members and employ project management tools (such as Airtable and Costpoint) to monitor progress and costs.

Moreover, the management plan is designed to maintain distance between implementation and research, consistent with the U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education guidance for independent evaluations. To ensure an independent evaluation, the AIR evaluation team will have no role in the TTQ implementation except through evaluation feedback. AIR trains staff to report concerns about independence and tracks labor charges by task to ensure independence of the evaluation team.

### **B3. Organizational Capacity to Bring the Project to Scale**

With a mission to generate and use rigorous evidence that contributes to a better, more equitable world, AIR is highly qualified for its role in the project. It has decades of experience in conducting large-scale research and managing complex projects and has built the corporate infrastructure to efficiently manage and support these projects, including extensive support for staff development, quality assurance, dissemination, financial management, information technology, data security, and an established project oversight and risk management system. AIR’s Institutional Review Board reviews and approves data collection and analysis.

AIR has a distinguished track record of leading projects focused on reading interventions, including several large scale-up studies. In each project shown in Exhibit 3, AIR played a lead role in coordinating with partner organizations, including intervention developers and school districts; recruited participating districts, schools, and teachers; and conducted an independent evaluation to assess impacts. AIR has proven experience recruiting the requisite number of districts and schools to participate in comparable projects that included randomized controlled trials (RCTs).

#### **Exhibit 3. AIR-Led Contracts and Grants to Scale and Test Reading Interventions**

<b>Project name</b>	<b>Partner(s) that provided the intervention</b>	<b>Districts</b>	<b>Schools</b>
TeacherRead Targeted Shared Book Reading Efficacy Study	University of Notre Dame	3	120
Children’s Literacy Initiative Scale-Up Evaluation	Children’s Literacy Initiative (CLI)	4	30
Impact Evaluation of Training in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support	Enhanced Classroom Reading Instruction (ECRI) by Boston University and University of	8	122





and support the work of the scholars' group, in collaboration with higher education partners. She has more than 10 years of recruitment experience on large-scale education studies, including for Education Innovation and Research (EIR) projects for the past 4 years; she has extensive experience brokering relationships between researchers and school administrators. [REDACTED], PhD, *Evaluation Lead*, will oversee the independent evaluation study. A certified reviewer for the WWC, [REDACTED] is a researcher with deep expertise in the design and conduct of RCTs. Additionally, the project is supported by experienced advisors and quality assurance reviewers (described in Appendix J.8) with deep collective expertise in adolescent literacy, research methodology, and implementation of large-scale literacy projects.

#### **B4. Mechanisms for Dissemination to Support Further Development or Replication**

To reach policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, we have developed an initial dissemination plan (Appendix J.6) based on our work with other large-scale projects. Dissemination activities will include the use of social media, scholarly journals, and publications and conferences aimed at practitioners such as multi-tiered systems of support coordinators, reading specialists, and middle-school literacy instructors. Given that a central purpose of our plan is to disseminate information of the effectiveness of TTQ among the research community, practitioners, policymakers, and professional development providers, these dissemination mechanisms will help support program replicability. The dissemination plan will also allow for educators to learn about the experience of other educators in utilizing TTQ and about the opportunities and barriers for high-quality implementation. Evidence from the wide variety of settings in the study—reflecting racial, socio-economic, geographic, and regional diversity—will inform future potential adoptees of TTQ about how the program will suit the needs of their students.

With its reputation and reach among teachers, districts, and state organizations in developing educational resources, Ancora will develop briefs, infographics, web events, and videos with information on the project, its results, and lessons learned; these will be made available on the TTQ

and Ancora websites. These dissemination products will focus on applications to practice and supporting the scaling of TTQ, and they will provide evidence and testimonials about the relationship between social-emotional learning, particularly motivation, and the development of reading skills. AIR will translate the evaluation findings into accessible highlights through products such as blogs, videos, social media posts, brief practitioner-friendly reports and examples in practice, and infographics. AIR will also leverage its leadership of national and regional education centers—such as the National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII), the regional comprehensive centers, and the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders—to reach broad audiences of policymakers, practitioners, professional development providers, and researchers. For example, we will submit the results to the NCII Instructional Tools Chart, a widely used resource for schools and districts to find program information. The AIR and Ancora team will publish articles in journals, including peer-reviewed journals (e.g., *Exceptional Children*, *Journal of Learning Disabilities*) and practitioner journals and trade publications (e.g., *Reading Teacher*, *Educational Leadership*), and present on the results of this project at conferences (e.g., National Center for Teacher Effectiveness, Association for Middle Level Education).

## **B5. Utility of Products That Result From the Proposed Project**

The proposed project will inform journal articles, conference presentations, policy briefs, and electronic media content, which will provide useful information to a wide range of audiences with varied levels and types of expertise. As described in Section A1, there is a tremendous need for evidence-based and content-relevant reading interventions for middle school students. At the completion of the proposed project work, the proposed study design will identify the impact on TTQ on reading achievement, skills, and motivation, as well as identify in which contexts TTQ is most effective, with particular emphasis on racial, socio-economic, and geographic diversity. This will provide rigorous information to inform broader use of TTQ and help educators and other audiences better understand the features and implementation of a comprehensive Tier 2 reading program. The emphasis on implementing and learning from the project in diverse contexts will help educators

understand how TTQ can support local needs and students. The dissemination plan as described in

## **C. Quality of the Project Design**

### **C1. Conceptual Framework**

The Theory of Change, depicted in Appendix G, provides a visual representation of how TTQ is

## C2. Goals, Objectives, and Outcomes That Are Clearly Specified and Measurable

The goal of the project is to implement TTQ with fidelity in a variety of new settings (i.e., small,

### Exhibit 4. Objectives, Strategies, Outcomes, and Measures

Strategies	Outcomes	Measures
<b>Objective 1: Implement and refine TTQ scaling supports through a yearlong field test (2024–25 SY)</b>		
Strategy 1.1: Recruit 8 pilot schools who are willing to participate in field test.	Districts and schools agree to participate in the implementation of TTQ for 1 school year.	Measure 1.1: Districts and schools provide signatures on the project MOU for eight schools in the pilot phase.
Strategy 1.2: Build capacity of		Measure 1.2: A district coordinator from
Strategy 1.3: Provide summer training prior to the start of implementation and collaborative workshops during implementation of TTQ.	Pilot instructors and district coordinators understand the delivery and purpose of the program and have support to implement the program as designed.	Measure 1.3: Responses to a survey administered to instructors and district coordinators indicates they understand the purpose of TTQ and perceive they have adequate supports to implement the program.
Strategy 1.4: Provide follow-	Pilot instructors and coordinators	Measure 1.4: Biannual memo of
Strategy 1.5: Implement TTQ with a high degree of fidelity in 8 schools (2024-25 school year).	Instructors implement TTQ as designed.	Measure 1.5: The average intervention instructor in the pilot phase completes at least 67 out of 75 TTQ lessons across the school year.
Strategy 1.6: Collect formative	Formative evaluation data are	Measure 1.6: All instructors and at least
Strategy 1.7: Refine scaling supports based on feedback.	Training materials, coordinator guides, and implementation schedules are revised.	Measure 1.7: Biannual memo summarizing revisions to each of the three types of scaling supports.
<b>Objective 2: Implement TTQ at scale with fidelity and determine its impacts (2025–26 and 2026–27 SY)</b>		
Strategy 2.1: Recruit schools to implement TTQ in Grade 6 and/or Grade 7.	Districts and schools agree to participate and to be randomly assigned to conditions.	Measure 2.1: Districts and schools provide signatures on the project MOU for 72 schools in the impact evaluation phase.

Strategies	Outcomes	Measures
Strategy 2.2: Randomly assign		Measure 2.2: Baseline equivalence and
Strategy 2.3: Build capacity of district-level coordinators to support TTQ implementation.	Each coordinator is able to support sustained implementation of TTQ.	Measure 2.3: A district coordinator from each treatment school (36 coordinators) attends the summer training and two follow-up trainings and completes a survey indicating readiness.
Strategy 2.4: Provide summer	Instructors and district	Measure 2.4: All instructors and district-
Strategy 2.5: Provide follow-up implementation materials to treatment schools.	Instructors and coordinators in treatment schools receive guidance materials and implementation checklists that support implementation of TTQ.	Measure 2.5: List of guidance materials and checklists provided to treatment schools documented in memo.
Strategy 2.6: Implement TTQ	Treatment instructors complete	Measure 2.6: The average treatment
Strategy 2.7: Collect and measure fidelity of implementation data as well as cost information (e.g., labor hours).	Fidelity of implementation data and costs of implementation are collected; social-emotional components of lessons are reviewed by scholars' group.	Measure 2.7: At least 90% of treatment schools have a video classroom observation completed; at least 85% of instructors complete the implementation survey and provide cost information.
Strategy 2.8: Evaluate the	Data on outcome measures are	Measure 2.8: Data collection progress and
<b>Objective 3: Broaden the project's impact through dissemination and further implementation (2025+)</b>		
Strategy 3.1: Create products such as peer-reviewed journal articles, briefs, infographics, web events, videos.	Impact study interim and final reports; report briefs; cost analysis report; and journal, blog, infographics, videos, and newsletter articles are created based on project learnings.	Measure 3.1: Number of written products and number of times each product is cited or shared.
Strategy 3.2: Leverage	Partners collaborate to engage	Measure 3.2: Number of times each
Strategy 3.3: Present findings at research conferences and large practitioner convenings.	Partners collaborate to share project learnings at 1 or 2 conferences per year beginning in Year 2, building knowledge among potential TTQ users and the wider field.	Measure 3.3: Number of presentations made per project year.

Strategies	Outcomes	Measures
Strategy 3.4: Implement TTQ	Control schools receive TTQ with	Measure 3.4: Number of control schools

### C3. Appropriateness to Needs of Target Population

As we describe in Section A1, most middle school English language arts (ELA) curricula assume a

### D. Quality of the Project Evaluation

The TTQ Theory of Change posits that a consistent emphasis on key secondary literacy skills,

aligns with the Theory of Change and includes both formative and summative components.

### **D1. Evaluation Designed to Meet WWC Evidence Standards Without Reservations**

The outcome evaluation will examine the impact of TTQ on the intended student outcomes, shown

#### **Exhibit 5. Impact Evaluation Research Questions and Data Sources**

<b>Research question (RQ)</b>	<b>Data sources</b>
RQ1. What is the impact of TTQ on student reading	Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills
RQ2. Does the impact of TTQ on reading achievement	DIBELS and Gates-MacGinitie composite and
RQ3a. What is the impact of TTQ on students' reading	Learning with Others Survey (2025–26 and 2026–27)

AIR will use a blocked cluster RCT to generate evidence to answer RQs 1–3. Two cohorts of

and will continue with business as usual through the study period. Schools in the control group will

The analytic sample will consist of all schools in study districts that are randomized to conditions,

To ensure that students are not differentially placed into Tier 2 reading classrooms based on their



reading classrooms and provide the same Tier 1 reading instruction to students placed into Tier 2

Low attrition of schools is expected during the evaluation period, as the evaluation window is

All analytic specifications will control for beginning-of-year test scores, and for other baseline

teacher, aide), class period length, number of sessions per week, and whether a student also receives

Trained data collectors will administer the DIBELS 8, a 5-minute test with oral reading fluency

to follow up with any students who were absent on the day that LWO was first administered.

### **Formative Evaluation**

The formative evaluation will examine fidelity and quality of implementation (Exhibit 6), using

#### **Exhibit 6. Formative Evaluation Research Questions and Data Sources**

<b>Research question</b>	<b>Data sources</b>
RQ4a. To what extent was TTQ implemented with fidelity?	Instructor lesson logs, instructor fidelity
RQ5a. To what extent did instructors implementing TTQ find the	Instructor survey (2024–25, 2025–26, and
RQ5b. What modifications to TTQ components and supports could	
RQ6a. To what extent did students engaging in TTQ find the	
RQ6b. What modifications to TTQ components and supports could	

Research question	Data sources
RQ7. What is the cost-effectiveness of TTQ?	Findings from RQ1; cost study logs

## D2. Guidance About Effective Strategies Suitable for Replication or Testing

This evaluation will produce evidence about the implementation and impact of TTQ in a large and

AIR also proposes a cost-effectiveness study to estimate the cost of replicating the delivery of

efficient way, identifying their efficient practices and suggesting them to other current and future

### **D3. Articulation of Components, Mediators, Outcomes, and Measurable Threshold**

TTQ is designed to deliver each of the key components described in the Theory of Change, as shown

The formative evaluation will examine the implementation fidelity (RQ 4a and 4b) of the

To measure fidelity of program implementation, AIR will analyze data from three sources during

Using data from these three sources, AIR will then analyze and describe implementation fidelity

for each program component across student, school, and educator contexts. AIR will analyze

To provide more nuanced evidence on implementation, quality, and utility, AIR will examine

To better understand student experience with TTQ (RQs 6a and 6b), AIR will administer a brief

AIR will conduct a mediator analysis (RQ 3b) to examine the extent to which program impact

#### **D4. Procedures Ensuring Feedback and Periodic Assessment of Progress**

The multi-cohort structure of the evaluation will ensure that each successive cohort benefits from

Estimates of the effects of TTQ on student reading achievement and skills and student reading

To provide ongoing data on TTQ implementation, during all three cohorts of the study, the

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