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How aimswebPlus Aligns with the Science of Reading

Whitepaper

By: LaTonya Cutley, PhD, Ed.S.

Introduction

This white paper evaluates the extent to which aimswebPlus™ aligns with the **Science of Reading (SoR)** and current literacy policy requirements, positioning the assessment system within the broader goal of early risk identification through universal screening.

As districts navigate increasing state-level SoR legislation — including mandates for explicit phonics instruction, dyslexia screening, limits on three cueing, and approved instructional materials — **the need for technically adequate and instructionally coherent screeners has intensified.**

Widely adopted for its comprehensive coverage and practical assessment tools, aimswebPlus helps schools efficiently identify student needs and support effective instruction.

In the following sections, we examine how aimswebPlus aligns with SoR, addresses current literacy legislation, and empowers educators to implement research-based practices.

Literature Review

The literature on reading development and assessment underscores the importance of aligning instructional practices with research-backed models of how students learn to read.

Decades of research summarized in the SoR have identified critical components that collectively support proficient reading (National Reading Panel, 2000; Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Scarborough, 2001):

Phonological awareness

Phonics

Fluency

Vocabulary

Comprehension

These components provide the theoretical foundation for evidence-based instruction and for the design of universal screening tools that inform early intervention. Within this context, aimswebPlus functions as a multidimensional assessment system designed to measure these key constructs and to guide data-driven instruction within MTSS.

The following review examines empirical and theoretical literature connecting the SoR framework to aimswebPlus, highlighting how research on reading development, psychometric alignment, and policy mandates inform the tool's instructional relevance and validity.

SoR provides a coherent theoretical and empirical foundation for designing and evaluating early literacy assessments. Core consensus documents — including the What Works Clearinghouse practice guide (2016, rev. 2019) and the International Dyslexia Association's Knowledge and Practice Standards (2018) — agree on the need for explicit, sequenced instruction and measurement across phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Two complementary models anchor this framework: the **Simple View of Reading (SVR)**, which defines reading comprehension as the product of decoding and language comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990; Catts, Adlof, & Weismer, 2006), and **Scarborough's Reading Rope**, which highlights how word recognition and language comprehension strands intertwine to yield skilled reading over time (Scarborough, 2001).

Empirical studies support these models, demonstrating that most word recognition problems reflect phonological processing deficits (Snowling, 2000; Melby-Lervag, Lyster, & Hulme, 2012) while "poor comprehenders" often show adequate decoding but limited vocabulary and broader oral language (Catts, Adlof, & Weismer, 2006). Together with the National Reading Panel's synthesis, these lines of evidence support the SoR-aligned practice of assessing each component skill to guide instruction and intervention.

aimswebPlus applies the SVR and Scarborough's Reading Rope by systematically measuring the component skills that research identifies as essential for skilled reading. The SVR (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) conceptualizes reading comprehension as the product of decoding and language comprehension, while Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001) expands this model into interwoven strands representing word recognition and language comprehension.

aimswebPlus aligns with these models through each of its measures:

Word Recognition Strand (Decoding Skills)

- **Phonological Awareness**
  e.g., Initial Sounds, Phoneme Segmentation
- **Decoding and Phonics**
  e.g., Nonsense Word Fluency, Letter Word Sound Fluency
- **Fluent word recognition in text**
  Oral Reading Fluency

Language Comprehension Strand

- **Vocabulary Knowledge**
  e.g., Vocabulary, Auditory Vocabulary
- **Listening and Reading Comprehension**
  e.g., Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension

These measures allow educators to pinpoint whether a student's reading difficulty originates from word-level processes (such as phonemic awareness or decoding) or language comprehension (such as vocabulary or syntactic understanding). This diagnostic clarity supports SoR principles, which emphasize explicit, systematic instruction in both strands of reading development.

Aligning the measures and evaluation tools in aimswebPlus with established models of reading development, such as the SVR and Scarborough's Reading Rope, guides how assessment items measure essential component skills — like phonological awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Building on this foundation, universal screening is a critical first step in prevention-based approaches like RTI and MTSS. Within these approaches, schools can more efficiently identify students who require additional support and provide evidence-based interventions that address individual needs early on, before academic failure occurs. When teachers understand what screeners can and cannot do, they are better able to help students become strong readers and succeed in school (Winter 2022).

aimswebPlus implements universal screening as part of a MTSS by offering fast and dependable assessments of essential literacy skills for students in various grades. Its screening tools identify students at risk for reading difficulties early, enabling educators

> "This approach allows educators to identify exactly where a student may need support and plan targeted, evidence-based interventions that address those areas. In effect, structuring assessments to reflect research-backed literacy skills makes it possible that instructional decisions are both well-informed and effective."

to implement targeted interventions before gaps widen. Because aimswebPlus assessments are research-aligned and sensitive to growth, they not only flag risk but also inform instructional planning and progress monitoring. Using both screening and ongoing evaluation allows schools to promptly adjust support based on current data, which is essential for prevention-focused strategies like RTI and MTSS.

> A 2025 narrative review of dyslexia risk screening shows that using multiple measures administered at different screening points yields stronger predictive validity than relying on a single assessment."

Building on this, REL Midwest (2021) emphasizes the importance of structured, research-based selection processes that reflect local needs. Both best practices align with how aimswebPlus provides multiple measures to assess different reading abilities. These measures can be administered repeatedly throughout the school year and are carefully designed to be appropriate and insightful for each grade level. Validity and reliability are not fixed traits of an assessment; they are achieved through consistent, contextually informed implementation. Evidence from the aimswebPlus Development and Technical Manuals demonstrate strong validity and reliability based on real-world use of these measures and composite scores in schools.

aimswebPlus follows best practices for assessing the performance of its screening and progress monitoring tools, in alignment with requirements set by the National Center for Intensive Intervention (NCII). The NCII conducts independent expert reviews of technical evidence for academic screening and progress monitoring assessments. Reviews focus on performance metrics relevant to effectively identifying students needing additional help and monitoring their progress through intensive interventions. NCII reviews of aimswebPlus screening and progress monitoring measures for reading and math are available on the NCII Tools Charts, verifying evidence of strong technical performance in areas such as criterion validity, reliability, classification accuracy, and alternative-form consistency.

Recent updates of NCII's academic screening tools chart incorporate the latest aimswebPlus research on the validity, reliability, and classification accuracy of reading and math composite scores. NCII ratings show that aimswebPlus composite scores meet industry standards across these performance metrics, based on strong or at least partially strong evidence across grade levels and performance categories. These recent updates to the NCII charts reflect and complement previous reviews of aimswebPlus progress monitoring tools, which also rate highly for technical metrics like validity, reliability, consistency, and bias analysis. Overall, these reviews affirm how aimswebPlus measures and composites demonstrate the strong psychometric properties and technical adequacy needed to support academic screening and progress monitoring.

Building on this technical foundation, aimswebPlus maintains updated national norms. Most recently, new national norms for aimswebPlus Early Literacy and Reading measures were released in 2025–2026. These updates allow for national percentile rankings to reflect current student performance patterns in the United States. By recalibrating risk-tier thresholds and national percentile benchmarks, these updates improve the precision of risk identification and progress-monitoring decisions.

As states increasingly embed SoR principles into law, the operational demands on districts have intensified — requiring not only the adoption of evidence-based instructional practices but also the integration of technically sound assessment tools that support compliance and fidelity.

The aimswebPlus set of CBMs is designed to assess foundational reading skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, and comprehension, which are central to SoR-aligned instruction. Its progress monitoring capabilities enable educators to track student growth over time, ensuring timely interventions and adherence to MTSS/RTI protocols.

Moreover, aimswebPlus reporting features facilitate transparent communication with families and support documentation requirements tied to parent notification, retention decisions, and state-mandated literacy plans.

> When implemented with fidelity and aligned to state-specific benchmarks and cut scores, aimswebPlus serves as a scalable solution that empowers districts to meet statutory obligations while advancing equitable, data-driven literacy instruction."

Taken together, theoretical models (e.g., SVR and the Reading Rope), guidance (WWC, 2019; IDA, 2018; Castles et al., 2018), psychometric research on screening (Morgan, 2024; Porter, 2022; Forcht, 2024; REL Midwest, 2021), and current policy expectations (ESSA, 2015; OSERS, 2015; CCSSO, 2024) agree on the requirements that high-quality literacy screeners must meet.

> The aimswebPlus shows how these requirements are implemented by turning literacy science into practical, scalable data that supports MTSS, early intervention, and ongoing improvement. It also recognizes the need for updated norm integration and stronger evidence of fairness."

Overview

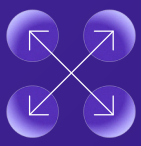
aimswebPlus is a universal screening and progress monitoring tool designed to support academic achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics for students from PreK through Grade 12.

It equips educators with dependable measures for early risk identification, ongoing growth tracking, and data-informed instructional planning within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework.

Intended Use

The system is intended to help schools identify students at risk for academic difficulties, monitor growth over time, and guide instructional planning. By linking assessment results to key reading and math skills, aimswebPlus enables educators to make informed decisions on interventions and track their effectiveness. It also supports compliance with state and federal requirements for evidence-based practices, including early literacy screening and screening for characteristics of dyslexia.

Key Features



Comprehensive measures

We review your organisation's processes and policies to ensure your training meets global quality benchmarks.

Add-on assessments

Our rigorous quality assurance approach helps ensure your learners achieve meaningful, measurable results.

Integrated resources

Pearson's global reputation strengthens the credibility of your programmes.

Progress monitoring

We review your programmes annually to keep them aligned with evolving standards and goals.

Methodology

An evidence-mapping synthesis was conducted across three key sources:

1

Technical documentation and manuals for aimswebPlus.

2

Peer-reviewed research and practice guides on reading screening and the SoR.

3

Federal and state policy sources relevant to universal screening, MTSS/RTI, and SoR alignment.

This approach was chosen to combine methodological, instructional, and policy views, and to compare findings from different sources.

The search included bibliographic databases and organizational resources and documents (e.g., ERIC, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, NCII Tools Charts, WWC, department of education websites from various states, and Pearson technical libraries). Search terms combined keywords and controlled vocabulary related to aimswebPlus, curriculum-based measurement, universal screening, progress monitoring, MTSS/RTI, SoR, phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, validity, reliability, and classification-accuracy analyses. Reference lists of key reports and articles were scanned for additional sources (backward citation tracking), and forward citation tracking was used to identify newer relevant publications.

This review relied on existing documentation (e.g. technical reports for psychometric details, independent evaluations, and policy guidance) without any primary data collection or student-level analysis. As a result, certain insights (especially detailed statistics) depended on what was reported in available sources, which could introduce publication or citation bias. To mitigate these limitations, the methodology incorporated several quality assurance measures: peer reviews and debriefings were carried out at key stages to verify interpretation of data and ensure no major evidence was overlooked. Moreover, a transparent search strategy with predefined inclusion criteria and standardized data extraction was employed.

Findings

Findings indicate that aimswebPlus effectively translates core SoR constructs into brief, reliable indicators that support early identification and intervention.

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The system measures phonemic awareness (Phoneme Segmentation), phonics and decoding (Nonsense Word Fluency; Letter/Word Sounds), reading fluency (Oral Reading Fluency; Silent Reading Fluency/Maze), vocabulary (grades 2–12), and reading comprehension. Collectively, these data help educators determine whether a student's difficulty reflects word-recognition or language-comprehension constraints, aligning with the SVR and Scarborough's Reading Rope.

At the instructional level, aimswebPlus data streamlines MTSS decisions by quickly identifying risk through foundational skills, assessing broader language with fluency and vocabulary, and pinpointing whether comprehension issues involve automaticity or meaning making.

> "When paired with teacher expertise, multi-measure decision rules, and systematic progress monitoring, aimswebPlus provides a coherent, SoR-aligned framework for guiding instruction and delivering equitable, prevention-oriented literacy support."

Technical documentation for aimswebPlus consistently demonstrates strong psychometric properties, particularly in alternate-form reliability, which supports consistent measurement across equivalent test forms. Criteria validity ranges from adequate to strong, indicating that aimswebPlus scores meaningfully correlate with external indicators of reading achievement. The system's progress-monitoring features are well-developed, offering frequent, sensitive assessments that support instructional decision-making and goal setting within MTSS frameworks.

This technical strength is closely aligned with the SoR framework, which emphasizes the importance of valid and reliable measurement of foundational reading components — such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. aimswebPlus's psychometric rigor ensures that each of these critical skills is assessed accurately, enabling educators to use data-driven insights for early identification and targeted intervention.

The alignment with SoR is evident in the aimswebPlus multidimensional assessment approach, which mirrors research-based models like the Simple View of Reading and Scarborough's Reading Rope. These models highlight the need to evaluate both word recognition and language comprehension, and aimswebPlus measures are specifically designed to reflect these constructs, supporting effective instruction and prevention-focused strategies within MTSS.

Independent reviews from the NCII corroborate these findings. On the NCII Tools Chart, aimswebPlus earns ratings ranging from convincing to partially convincing across key criteria:

This affirms its technical adequacy for universal screening and progress monitoring. Also, the NCII Tools Chart indicates that subgroup fairness data for several aimswebPlus measures were "Not Provided." As a result, NCII advises users to conduct local validation to ensure the tool functions equitably across student groups. Instead, aimswebPlus implements a robust fairness review process. Internal and external sensitivity reviews by diverse experts assess items for cultural fairness, clarity, and representation. Additionally, aimswebPlus conducts Differential Item Functioning (DIF) analyses to identify and address potential subgroup bias. These procedures are documented in the aimswebPlus technical and development manuals, even if not all data was submitted to NCII.

Recent national norm updates strengthen representativeness and enhance the precision of risk identification and progress-monitoring decisions. Refinements to early-grade Early Literacy composites increase developmental coherence by aligning assessment content more closely with early reading trajectories and instructional expectations. While aimswebPlus provides extensive national-level fairness evidence, NCII's emphasis on local validation remains important; aimswebPlus offers flexible reporting and data tools that allow schools and districts to examine subgroup performance, monitor equitable implementation, and tailor practices and interventions to their communities.

> "Policy alignment represents a significant practical advantage of aimswebPlus, particularly as states and federal agencies increasingly codify SoR principles into law."

At the federal level, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires that schools implement evidence-based assessments and interventions — tools that demonstrate strong validity, reliability, and impact on student outcomes. aimswebPlus meets these criteria through its robust technical documentation and favorable independent reviews, including those from the NCII.

Additionally, guidance from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) emphasizes the importance of early screening for dyslexia and other reading difficulties. aimswebPlus supports this directive by offering measures that assess phonological awareness, decoding, and other early literacy skills known to predict dyslexia risk.

Discussion

Evidence from the review indicates that three design choices make aimswebPlus a strong candidate for SoR-aligned universal screening.

1 The system blends CBMs, which are sensitive to short-term instructional effects, with standards-aligned tasks such as Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension. This dual design reflects SoR's emphasis on both foundational skill mastery and grade-level language comprehension. CBMs target phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency — core decoding skills — while standards-aligned tasks assess vocabulary and comprehension, supporting the full scope of the SVR and Scarborough's Reading Rope.

2 The benchmarking and progress monitoring framework is purpose-built for MTSS, a model widely adopted in SoR-aligned state policies. aimswebPlus enables educators to set explicit goals, monitor growth slopes, and apply predefined decision rules to adjust instruction. This approach mirrors SoR's call for systematic, data-driven intervention and frequent progress checks to ensure instructional effectiveness and responsiveness.

3 The breadth of K–12 coverage ensures vertical coherence across developmental stages. This comprehensive span allows educators to track and support the progression from early decoding to advanced comprehension, aligning with SoR's developmental model of reading acquisition. By linking word recognition and language comprehension strands, aimswebPlus operationalizes the SVR and Scarborough's Reading Rope frameworks, providing actionable data that supports targeted, evidence-based instruction throughout a student's academic journey.

While aimswebPlus offers a comprehensive, research-aligned framework for monitoring literacy development across grade levels, the true impact of universal screening depends on how well the resulting data are used to inform local decisions. To maximize effectiveness and ensure equitable outcomes, districts should pair aimswebPlus adoption with local validity studies, fairness checks, and equity monitoring to ensure classification accuracy and consistent decision rules across race, language, and disability subgroups. Interpretations of classification accuracy and fairness should be grounded in the published literature and verified through local studies.

In today's rapidly evolving literacy policy landscape, aimswebPlus has become an essential tool for districts seeking to meet federal and state mandates aligned with SoR. At the federal level, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires the use of evidence-based assessments and interventions, while the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and guidance from the OSERS emphasize early identification of reading difficulties, including dyslexia. At the state level, legislation increasingly mandates universal screening in early grades, explicit phonics instruction, restrictions on three-cueing strategies, structured parent communication, and the use of approved instructional materials.

aimswebPlus directly supports these requirements by offering brief, technically sound CBMs that assess foundational reading skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Its reporting features enable timely and transparent communication with families, while its integration with MTSS frameworks allows educators to set goals, monitor progress, and adjust instruction based on student response. When used as intended, aimswebPlus offers a comprehensive, policy-aligned solution that empowers districts to act swiftly and effectively on student literacy needs.

Conclusions

This white paper set out to determine how aimswebPlus aligns with SoR, supports evidence-based instructional decision making, and meets contemporary policy expectations for universal screening and progress monitoring. The synthesis of technical manuals, research literature, and federal and state policy guidance demonstrates that aimswebPlus operationalizes essential SoR constructs — including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension — through brief, reliable measures that support early identification and targeted intervention within MTSS/RTI frameworks.

The system's blend of curriculum-based measures and standards-aligned tasks allows educators to quickly identify the source of reading difficulty and match instruction to students' specific needs. Recent national norm updates for 2025–2026 further strengthen developmental precision and risk classification without altering the assessment's underlying structure.

The aimswebPlus Development Manual outlines how bias and sensitivity considerations are built into the test development process, including the use of bias reviewers and item-level analyses such as differential item functioning (DIF). Measures are created through an integrative design process that incorporates pilot testing with diverse demographic groups to evaluate initial test designs for fairness and responsiveness. Independent reviews by the NCII further reinforce the tool's technical adequacy for academic screening and progress monitoring. However, the limited availability of publicly reported subgroup fairness evidence underscores the importance of ongoing local validation and equity monitoring to ensure that aimswebPlus functions equitably across race, language background, socioeconomic status, and disability categories.

> "When implemented thoughtfully, aimswebPlus provides a research-aligned, policy-responsive framework for early literacy screening and continuous improvement. Its combination of technical rigor, developmental coherence, and instructional actionability positions the system to meaningfully support early identification, equitable intervention, and improved reading outcomes across K–12 settings."

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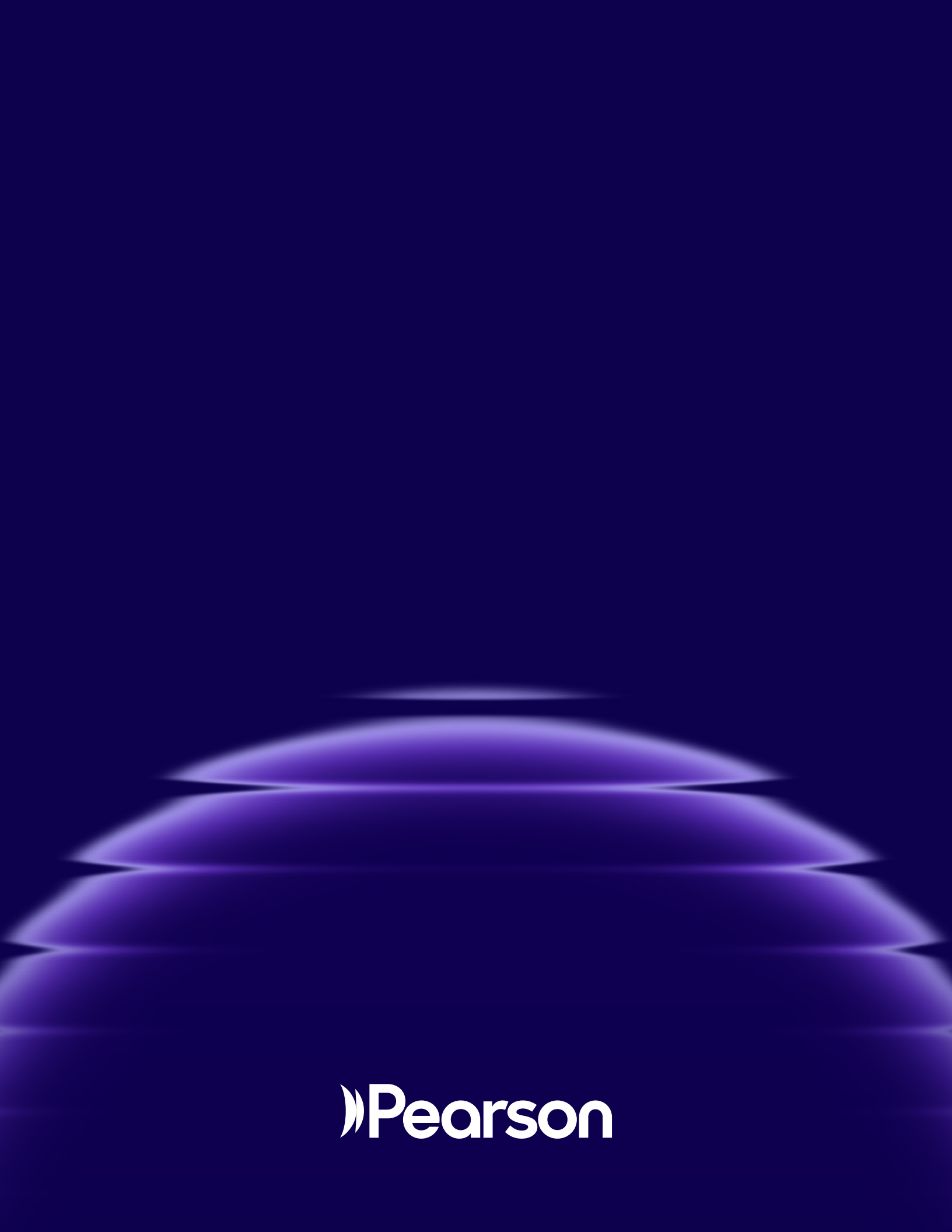
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