

Pre-K-12 Literacy

► State of the Nation

It is true — reading is fundamental. Research and statistics underscore the fact that the foundations for literacy are laid in the earliest years of life and have implications for a child's educational arc and post-schooling outcomes.

Literacy development is a cause-and-effect chain that starts at birth. Early language and literacy development, beginning in the first three years of life, is influenced by the experiences young children have with books, stories and relationships with adults. Early literacy is essential if a child is to be reading proficiently by the end of 3rd grade. Recent research suggests that students not reading proficiently in 3rd grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school. Stubbornly low graduation rates in certain areas and among specific student subgroups, coupled with the negative impacts correlated with dropping out of high school, make clear that improved reading proficiency levels in America are absolutely critical.

What's Inside

- Identification of current levels of literacy as measured by national indicators
- Discussion of the negative outcomes correlated with low literacy levels
- Policy approaches to improve student literacy, particularly in the early grades.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* examines:

- Low Pre-K-12 literacy levels nationally, especially for low-income and diverse student populations
- Trends in U.S. students' reading proficiency since the 1970s
- The negative impacts correlated with low reading levels
- Policy recommendations for improving literacy instruction and achievement, particularly in the early grades.



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What is “literacy”?

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which assesses 15-year-olds in industrialized nations on reading, math and science, defines “reading literacy” as “the ability to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate effectively in society.”¹ Put more simply, literacy means the ability to read and write.

Where are we now?

Literacy initiatives in the U.S. are nothing new. As a matter of fact, in 1969, then-U.S. Commissioner of Education James Allen initiated a program called “Right to Read” to elevate the importance of reading proficiency. By 1975, ECS identified 31 states that were bringing a major state focus to bear on ensuring literacy for their students.²

Yet decades of state and national focus on reading proficiency have not resulted in a nation of proficient readers. While trend data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) do suggest a narrowing of the Black/White achievement gap in grades 4, 8 and 12 since the 1970s, and a slightly smaller narrowing of the Hispanic/White achievement gap in grades 4 and 12 during the same period, the percentage of students of color reading at the proficient level is far too low. For some subgroups, the percentage of students scoring at or above Proficient was in the single digits in the most recent administration of the NAEP in reading.

Percent of Children Scoring At or Above Proficient in Reading: 2011 NAEP

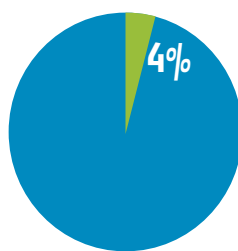
	4th Graders	8th Graders
American Indian/Alaska Native	18%	22%
Asian/Pacific Islander	50%	47%
Black	17%	15%
English Language Learner	7%	3%
Hispanic	19%	18%
Students with a Disability	8%	11%
White	43%	44%

Source: The Nation’s Report Card, 2011.

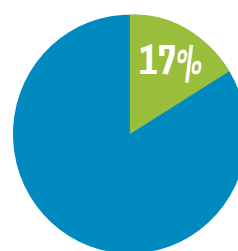
Snapshot of Literacy in the United States

- The long-term trend in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessments demonstrates that the literacy of 13- and 17-year-olds has stagnated for close to four decades.⁵
- At age 9, the average NAEP reading score in 2008 was 12 points higher than in 1971.⁶ However, this increase is still below proficient.
- The Black/White 3rd-grade reading gap narrowed by 20 points from 1971 to 2008, the 8th-grade gap narrowed by 17 points and the 12th-grade gap was reduced by 24 points.⁷
- The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) revealed that 30 million American adults scored at “below basic” – meaning they could perform no more than the most rudimentary literacy tasks.⁸

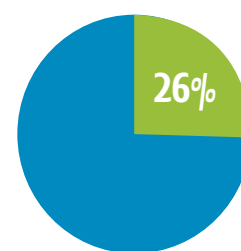
Percent of Children Who Do Not Finish High School



3rd-grade proficient readers



3rd-grade not proficient



3rd-grade not proficient and poor at least 1 year

Source: Hernandez, 2011.⁹

Literacy and the Home

- Between 1993 and 2007, parental involvement in home literacy activities with young children increased substantially. These activities included reading to the child, telling stories, and teaching words or numbers.¹⁰
- Between 1993 and 2007, more preschool children had school readiness skills, including letter recognition, counting, writing name, etc.¹¹

Progress in the Early Grades

- In 2010, 11% of 4-year-olds and 7% of 3-year-olds were enrolled in Head Start.¹²
- In 2010, 27% of 4-year-olds were enrolled in pre-kindergarten, compared to just 14% in 2002.¹³
- In October 2005, 93% of 5-year-olds were enrolled in school.¹⁴

Risks to Progress in the Early Grades

- Average state spending for Pre-K dropped in 2010 by \$114 per child to \$4028 adjusted for inflation. This figure was \$4,719 in 2002.¹⁵

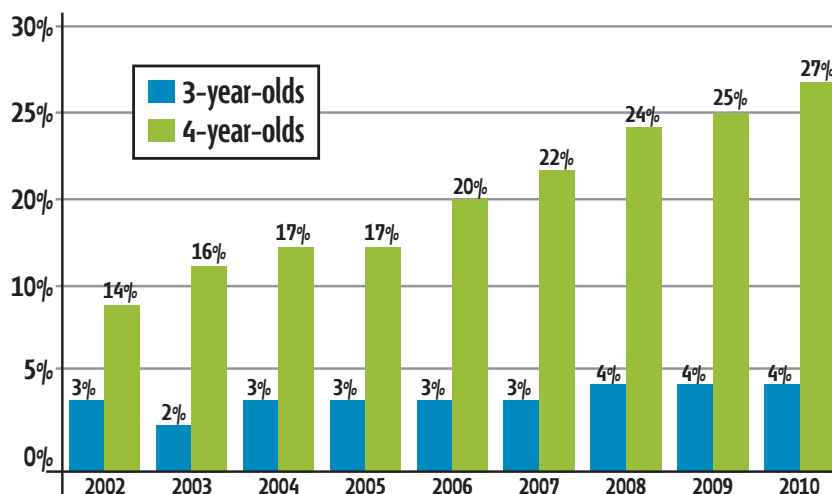
Trends in the Elementary and Middle Grades

- In 2011, about 1/3 of 4th and 8th graders reached proficiency in reading.¹⁶

Risks

- Children living below the federal poverty level were twice as likely to be chronic absentees in the elementary grades.¹⁷
- Chronic school absence is associated with lower educational attainments; the negative impact of school absences on literacy learning is 75% greater for low-income children than for their more affluent peers.¹⁸

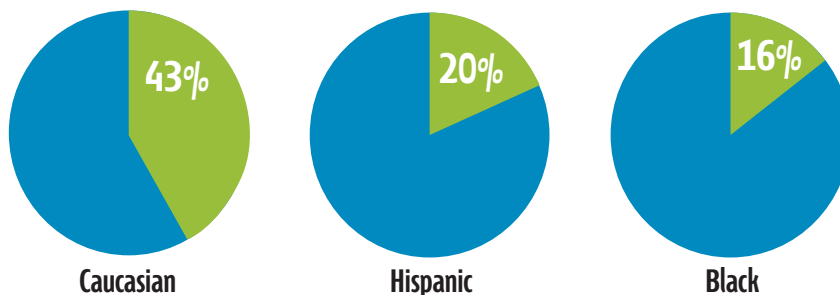
Percent of Children Enrolled in Pre-Kindergarten



Source: Barnett et al., National Institute of Early Education Research, May 2011, p.4.

High School

High School Seniors Scoring at or Above Proficient on Reading, 2005 NAEP



Source: The Nation's Report Card, 2007.¹⁹

Risks to High School Proficiency

- In 2010, fewer than half of high school students surveyed reported giving their maximum effort in "most" or "all" of their classes.²⁰
- In 2009, 8.1% of persons 15-24 had dropped out of school.²¹
- Only 57% of Black and Hispanic students graduated in 2009.²²

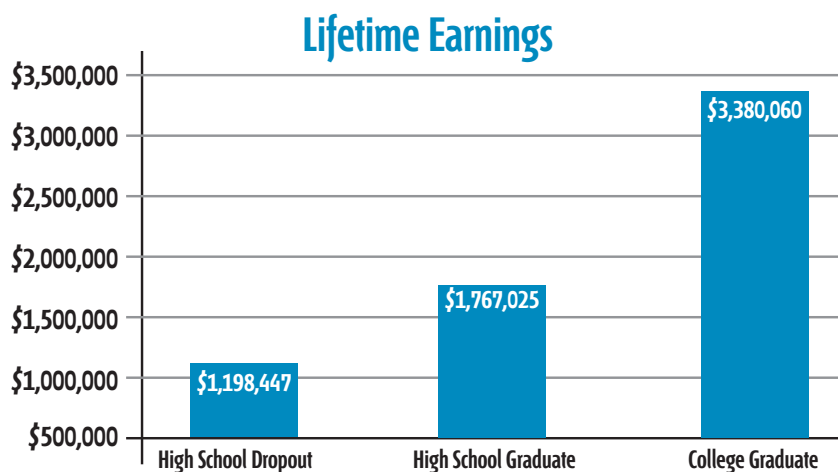
What are the potential impacts of not reading proficiently?

Research has identified potentially serious negative outcomes for students struggling to read in the early grades. According to the Annie E. Casey 2011 report, *Double Jeopardy*, students who are not proficient readers in 3rd grade are four times more likely not to have a high school diploma by age 19 than their peers who were proficient readers in 3rd grade. Of these young people not reading proficiently in 3rd grade, those who read at the “below basic” level were even more likely than those reading at the “basic” level not to have graduated high school by age 19. And children whose families had spent a year or more in poverty and who read below the proficient level in 3rd grade saw even worse outcomes.

And of course, much ink has been spilled on the negative impacts correlated with dropping out of high school, ranging from increased criminal activity and incarceration to poorer health outcomes. Inadequate levels of student literacy can negatively impact even those students who graduate high school and enter a postsecondary institution. As a 2011 analysis of postsecondary remediation data by the Alliance for Excellent Education indicates, states as a whole would save an estimated \$3.6 billion dollars from a reduced need for postsecondary remediation.²³

The Impact of Dropping Out on Earnings

- In 2007, 60% of high school dropouts were in the lowest 30% of the income distribution, compared to 35% of high school graduates and 14% of college graduates.²⁴
- Those who graduate high school or have postsecondary education will have substantially higher earnings. A high school dropout can expect lifetime earnings (2008 dollars) of about \$1,198,447 compared to \$1,767,025 for a high school graduate, and \$3,380,060 for a college graduate.²⁵



Source: Carnevale et al., 2010.

What policy approaches might move the needle?

Given more than 40 years of policy activity with negligible results, policymakers may be discouraged from taking up the standard of reading reform. However, a report developed in the state of Massachusetts could be used by other states as they seek opportunities to improve literacy. A collaboration among university researchers, foundation leaders, agency heads and the governor’s office developed a set of strategies for Massachusetts to improve child literacy from birth to 9. *Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success* (follow link for details) draws “on the findings from the most current and salient research, including seminal national reports ... policy reports, regulations, state guidelines and standards, and relevant national and state-level data”, among other resources to identify five recommendations for action.²⁷

ECS Resources

P-3 Literacy Practices That Matter

An ECS synopsis of 5 recent studies.

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/95/73/9573.pdf>

Snapshots of literacy-related studies included in the ECS Research Studies Database

This is not a comprehensive collection of literacy research, but does reflect recent studies that are often not accessible to policymakers.

http://www.ecs.org/rs/SearchEngine/SearchResults.aspx?faq_id=a0870000006e7LiAAI

Recent State Policies on Reading/Literacy

The Education Commission of the States State Policy Tracking Database tracks hundreds of state education policies every year. See the following listing of recent state policies related to reading and literacy:

<http://www.ecs.org/ecs/ecscat.nsf/WebTopicView?OpenView&count=-1&RestrictToCategory=Reading/Literacy>

Specifically early literacy: <http://www.ecs.org/ecs/ecscat.nsf/WebTopicView?OpenView&count=-1&RestrictToCategory=Reading/Literacy--Early+Literacy>

ECS issue site on reading and literacy

Includes links to a rich set of resources from other organizations, states and experts.

<http://www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueid=97>

State Adolescent Literacy Policies (2008)

http://www.ecs.org/html/educationissues/HighSchool/highschooldb1_intro.asp?topic=al

Making the Case for P-3

Guiding principles for improving integration and alignment of P-3.

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/75/22/7522.pdf>

Other Resources

Doing What Works

This Web site is a one-stop shop for research, demonstrations and other resources about early childhood literacy practices that have a strong evidence base. (U.S. Department of Education) Click on the literacy tab for other facets such as adolescent literacy, comprehension, etc.

http://dww.ed.gov/Preschool-Language-and-Literacy/topic/index.cfm?T_ID=15

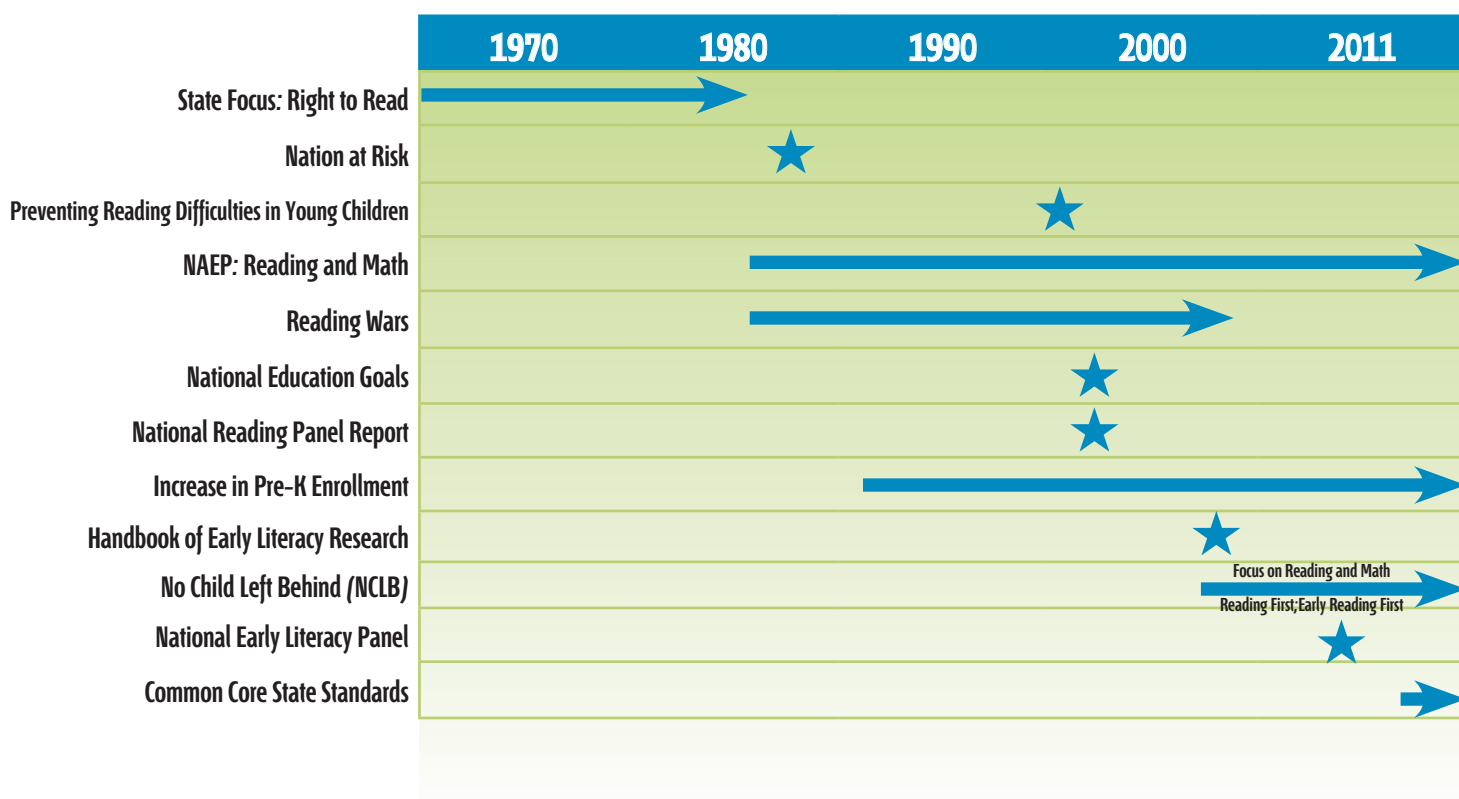
ECS presents recommendations for P-3 literacy with full recognition that attention to literacy cuts across the P-20 continuum. However, the early years set the stage for everything that follows, and the recommendations below address this critical time period.

ECS suggests that, particularly in light of the pending implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and related assessments, state efforts to improve literacy in the early grades might:

- ▶ Pay particular attention to whether early literacy efforts are rooted in knowledge development in Pre-K and full-day kindergarten, and ensure the broadest access possible to such efforts in those grades.
- ▶ Use implementation of the Common Core State Standards as an opportunity to deeply integrate the acquisition of knowledge as part of literacy strategies and to ensure alignment across all levels, P-3 to postsecondary.
- ▶ Provide broad opportunities for preservice and inservice teachers to improve how they teach students to read and to strengthen their use (and school-wide use) of data that informs such instruction.
- ▶ Use technology and other means to support early identification of both student and teacher literacy proficiency issues, and to support effective, immediate intervention.
- ▶ Expect principals to effectively support literacy instruction in the early grades, and include growth and proficiency in literacy as a key element in the evaluation of principals.

Despite efforts by the federal government, states and many national organizations during the last four decades, literacy in this country shows a mixed picture of slight improvement and stagnation. It is obvious that achieving reading proficiency is dependent on numerous factors including starting early, working on content and comprehension, and focusing on literacy at much later grades than has been the case in the past. Experience and some indicators suggest that activity around the right policy levers may, in fact, positively impact student literacy. As states move forward with implementation, they will need to be bold and continuously cognizant of this important goal: for students to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate effectively in society.

Seminal Moments in U.S. Literacy



Endnotes

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