

# Building a Better K-3 Literacy System

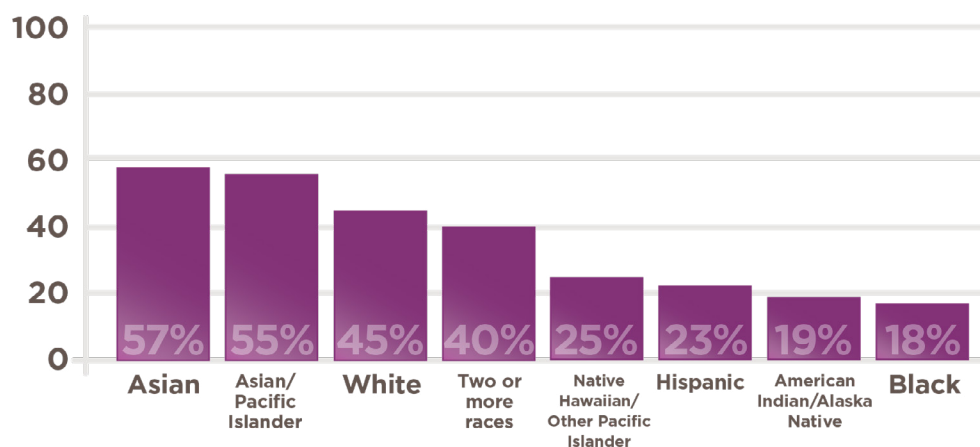
Adrienne Fischer and Eric Syverson

Children should develop literacy skills that progress from [learning to read to reading to learn as they](#) move from kindergarten through early elementary. These skills support reading proficiency and build knowledge in all subject areas. Students who struggle with literacy skills as early as kindergarten often [continue to read below grade level throughout the early grades](#). They also generally fail to receive the assistance they need to catch up.

[Reading proficiency rates have increased](#) for all student groups over the last two decades, as research has identified best practices for instruction, assessment, curriculum, teacher preparation and intensive intervention to prevent and mitigate reading difficulties. The millennium brought forth consensus about what children need to learn to read. As the National Research Council stated in its 1998 report, "[Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children](#)": "The knowledge base is now large enough that the controversies that have dominated discussions of reading development and reading instruction have given way to ... a shared focus on the needs and rights of all children to read."

In addition to an ongoing gap between research and implementation, gaps also persist between student groups, including by race and family income level. The 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results revealed flat or decreasing reading proficiency scores across all student groups. [Twenty-one percent of fourth grade students](#) from low-income households attained reading proficiency on the assessment, as compared with 51% of students from higher-income households. Notably, children who do not read proficiently by fourth grade are [4 times more likely to drop out or fail to graduate on time](#) than proficient readers.

**2019 NAEP Reading Achievement by Race**  
(percentage of students scoring at or above proficient)



States have [enacted at least 91 bills](#) since 2017 to improve early literacy outcomes across the literacy spectrum. This Policy Brief provides an overview of state strategies to promote literacy in kindergarten through third grade. They are best practices in assessment, prevention and intervention. It also provides examples of state literacy strategies that incorporate research-based approaches and policy takeaways for consideration.

## Prevention, Intervention and the Role of Assessment

High-quality curriculum, instruction and assessment in kindergarten through third grade [are necessary](#) to achieve reading proficiency. It is also important to begin developing early literacy skills prior to kindergarten and to solidify them beyond third grade. This process is supported by a [multitiered](#), dynamic continuum of prevention and intervention informed by developmentally appropriate assessment. High-quality reading instruction employs research-based practices grounded in child development and in the [science of reading](#).

**Prevention** is the foundational instruction received by all students, regardless of risk factors or skill level. Its purpose is to elevate the quality of reading instruction and to facilitate effective learning. This may include teacher professional development and coaching, curriculum selection or school-level changes such as group size or teacher-pupil ratios.

High-quality preschool environments can also contribute to strong early literacy skills and to proficiency in early elementary. They have been linked to [better outcomes](#) in literacy, math and grade retention, particularly [among English language learners and students from low-income backgrounds](#).

**Intervention** identifies individual needs and provides [targeted supports](#) for students with reading difficulties. Intervention may include an individualized plan with [small group](#) or one-on-one instruction in conjunction with instruction outside the classroom and/or over the summer. Families often participate through home-based activities.

**Assessment** identifies a student's reading challenges and monitors their progress. Reading assessment is commonly conflated with federal accountability requirements. But assessments administered throughout the K-2 years are generally developmentally appropriate and brief. They also provide actionable feedback to teachers and families. See the glossary for definitions of the different types of assessments.

## Retention

Some state policies stipulate that students who do not demonstrate reading proficiency on summative assessments by the end of third grade cannot advance to the next grade. Retention requirements are intended to create stronger incentives for schools and teachers to focus on

## GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

**Early literacy:** foundational language and communication skills that precede the ability to read or write, such as letter recognition, phonological awareness and oral language .

**Literacy:** the ability to read and write well.

**Reading comprehension:** the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language.

**Screener:** brief assessment of a particular skill or ability that is highly predictive of a later learning outcome and that can be used to group students for instruction.

**Diagnostic assessment:** a combination of standardized and informal tests used to determine a student's eligibility for specialized programming, such as special education or tiered intervention.

**Formative assessment:** a planned, ongoing process used during learning and teaching; it elicits and uses evidence of student learning to improve understanding of intended learning outcomes and to support students.

**Summative assessment:** an assessment administered once, typically at the end of a semester or school year, to evaluate student performance against a defined set of content standards.

prevention and intervention to promote literacy skills and to ensure all students enter fourth grade with strong reading skills. Retention generally follows intervention as a last resort and coincides with *good cause exemptions* for students, including dual language learners and students with disabilities.

Research on the efficacy of retention provides mixed results. Some studies show adverse effects on graduation rates and postsecondary attainment. Other studies find that retention in early grades improves academic outcomes and proficiency rates for English language learners. Concerns include uneven implementation of policies among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and the cost effectiveness of retention measured against alternative interventions. Further research is needed to understand these relationships. While retention policies in **California** and **Florida** have been in place for decades, other mandatory

## Good Cause Exemptions

Good cause exemptions are a common aspect of retention policies. They present ways for students to demonstrate proficiency by alternative means or to be exempted based on student characteristics. Students with disabilities and an Individual Education Plan, along with English language learners with less than two years of instruction in English, are frequently exempted. States have made different exemptions to prevent students from being retained more than twice from kindergarten through third grade. Moreover, granting an exemption is not the end of a student's literacy instruction and intervention. In states like **Nevada**, a student promoted to fourth grade by an exemption must continue to receive intensive reading instruction.

retention policies have only recently been implemented. There are states that have introduced mandatory retention in addition to literacy supports, making it difficult to determine the driver of student outcomes.

## K-3 Literacy Programs and Policies

State policy has generally focused on prevention, intervention and retention to support student literacy development. States continue to rely on this framework to shape legislative efforts — the following sections outline policy actions and state examples since 2017.

### Prevention

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Prevention was a regular component of legislation since 2017. Many states enacted policies to require teacher professional development in scientifically based reading instruction. One example is [Idaho](#), which requires all K-12 teachers to demonstrate knowledge and skills consistent with current research on reading best practices, and educator preparation programs are required to offer aligned courses in reading instruction. In [Minnesota](#), districts are required to offer elementary teachers professional development in the five critical areas of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. States also addressed pre-service teacher training at the higher education level.

#### STATE SPOTLIGHT: VIRGINIA

In 2020, the [Virginia General Assembly](#) tasked the State Council of Higher Education with developing a statewide coalition of public universities to gather and share information on the latest research-based approaches to reading instruction for Virginia. The coalition will emphasize improvement in reading instruction for students with dyslexia.

[Wyoming](#) requires schools and districts that score below the state's proficiency goals to annually report their reading proficiency data and plans. Indicators of reading progress must be presented along with specificities concerning interventions and trainings. State assistance has also been employed for schools and districts that are struggling to meet reading proficiency. [Arizona](#) requires its department of education to provide implementation guidance and curricula support to districts, as well as prioritized supports for districts that have the highest percentage of students not demonstrating reading proficiency.

## Intervention

Literacy interventions were the most common element of all enacted legislation, as states focused on ways to aid students struggling with reading proficiency. Many states created policies to introduce or expand assessment instruments. As part of its supplemental reading intervention program, [Nebraska](#) passed legislation that recommended screeners be used, beginning in first grade, to monitor student progress throughout the school year and to adjust interventions as needed. States legislated individual reading plan policies for students identified by assessments as needing additional support to meet grade-level expectations. One part of the recently legislated [Alabama Literacy Act](#) requires districts to create an individual reading improvement plan for any student in need of intensive reading intervention.

### STATE SPOTLIGHT: MICHIGAN

In [Michigan](#), the department of education approves districts' assessment systems, which must include screening and formative and diagnostic elements. Districts must assess reading progress at least three times per year in grades K-3, and school administrators must tailor student interventions and teacher professional development based on these results.

Enacted legislation included strategies, such as summer reading programs, individual or group tutoring, and the involvement of a reading specialist during interventions. States established policies that require schools to inform parents of their plans and progress. Some policies called for family involvement. [Oklahoma](#) involves the parent or guardian in the student's Student Reading Proficiency Team.

### Dyslexia

Dyslexia refers to [a specific neurobiological learning disability](#) wherein children experience difficulties decoding the relationships between sounds and letters. It can lead to reading comprehension problems without proper prevention and intervention. [Between 5% and 12% of American children](#) have dyslexia. There are children who remain undiagnosed because of insufficient screening. Identifying dyslexic students is [especially critical in the K-3 years](#), when children are still mastering reading comprehension and interventions are most effective.

While students who are diagnosed with specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, are entitled to supports and accommodations under the [federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#), the diagnostic process is completed according to state and local policies. Many states have taken action in recent years to promote early identification and interventions for students with dyslexia. As of 2019, [46 states have passed legislation](#) related to dyslexia, ranging from adding a statutory definition of dyslexia to mandating universal screeners in early grades. However, [some states face barriers](#) to enforcement, as there are school districts that report insufficient guidance or funding to fulfill state mandates.

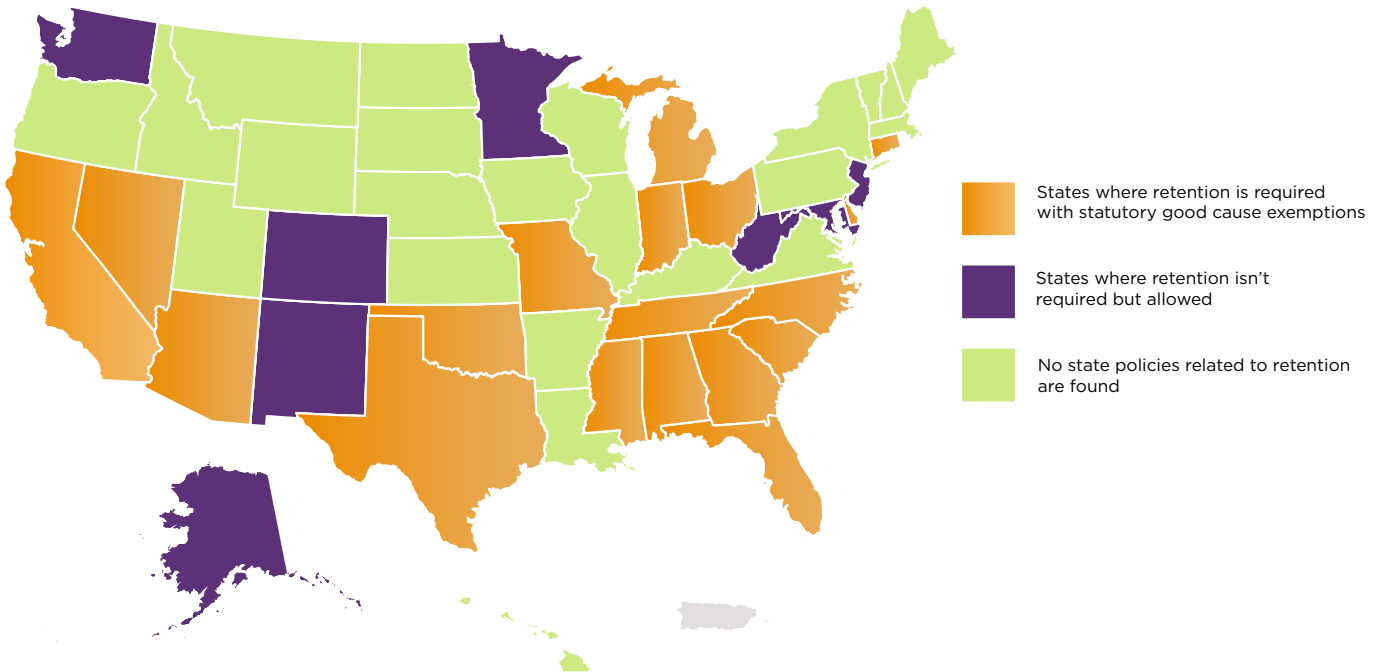
STATE SPOTLIGHT: ALABAMA

Beginning in the 2021-22 school year, [Alabama's](#) retention policy will allow students to demonstrate reading proficiency through measures other than the statewide summative assessment. Students can be promoted if they earn an acceptable score on an approved alternative assessment or demonstrate they have met the state's reading standards through a reading portfolio.

## Retention

Third-grade retention policies have become common, with many states adopting the practice recently. Retention policies differ along the following dimensions: whether retention is required or is discretionary; which entity determines whether a student must be retained; and whether there are exemptions or alternative options (besides summative testing) to demonstrate literacy skills to avoid retention. A number of states do not base retention decisions on a statewide assessment; instead, the decision is at the discretion of the school district, the student's teacher and — as is the case in [Colorado](#) — the student's parent or guardian.

### 50-State Map of Retention Policies With Variables



## Policy Considerations

Here are several considerations for policymakers when designing K-3 literacy policies:

**Make assessment a priority.** [Formative assessments](#) in the K-2 grades can help track progress and provide pathways to additional assistance for students reading below grade level. These

assessments are typically brief and can provide ongoing feedback to students, teachers and families in a timely fashion.

**Create policy within a continuum.** Prevention and intervention are interdependent elements that must work in tandem to create a strategy that produces the desired outcomes. Wherever possible, policies should be developed collaboratively to meet a shared vision.

**Focus on pre-K.** Research shows that achievement gaps are present [prior to kindergarten entry](#). Access to [high-quality pre-K](#) can improve early literacy skills ahead of kindergarten entry.

**Engage pre-service and in-service educators.** Professional development in reading instruction and child development for current classroom educators is key to improving student outcomes, but pre-service training is also an important consideration. Over the last several years, educator preparation programs have [increased their coverage of scientifically based reading instruction](#), yet states may consider collaborating with higher education leaders to establish goals or standards.

**Ensure that students in need of academic assistance receive individualized support.** States may consider improving the availability and use of assessment data to direct targeted supports to students who are most in need. They may also offer assistance and guidance for intervention at the district level once students have been identified.

## Final Thoughts

State policymakers continue to strive for better literacy outcomes by crafting policies and building systems that give young children the help they need to become competent readers. By operating within a dynamic continuum of prevention, intervention and assessment, teachers, families and administrators can access a variety of tools tailored to each student's skill set. Failure to improve literacy skills is likely to limit students' academic success and may lead to an undereducated workforce that is [unable to fully contribute](#) to the future economy. As the [National Research Council](#) concluded in 1998, "Most of the reading problems faced by today's adolescents and adults are the result of problems that might have been avoided or resolved in their early childhood years."

Many policymakers are taking action to address the needs of students in their states. Since 2011, at least 27 governors have mentioned early literacy or reading proficiency as a state priority during their [State of the State addresses](#). As conveyed by [Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee](#): "We will ensure adequate supports and interventions for students before they reach the critical third-grade milestone." The attention of state leaders is a vital factor in improving K-3 literacy systems, but as Lee concludes: "Moving the needle on early childhood literacy requires more than talk." States have a heavy task before them. But by incorporating best practices into a prevention-intervention policy continuum, states can better support students for a lifetime of success in literacy and beyond.



# About the Authors



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