

The Importance of Early Literacy

A Policy Brief by A+ Education Partnership



The Big Idea:



Reading is the foundation of all learning and fundamental to lifelong success, and reading instruction must start early. Every student has the ability to learn how to read and should be provided the support to do so to succeed in the workforce and in life.

Introduction

Reading is the foundation of all learning and fundamental to lifelong success. It impacts a person's ability to learn, ability to work, and ability to move through life independently. According to the American Educational Research Association, a student who can't read on grade level by 3rd grade is four times less likely to graduate high school. Add poverty to the mix, and a student is 13 times less likely to graduate than their wealthier peers.¹ Nationally, the average income for adults who reach minimum proficiency in literacy is almost \$63,000, more than the average income of those below proficiency (almost \$48,000), and much more than those with low levels of literacy (just over \$34,000).² As the Alabama Workforce Council (AWC) works to have 500,000 more highly skilled workers in the state by 2025, it is crucial that the youngest students are prepared early with the skills and knowledge they need, like literacy, to succeed. Every student has the ability to learn how to read and should be provided the support to do so to succeed in the workforce and in life.

What is Early Literacy?

In fourth grade, students transition from learning to read to reading to learn, so establishing a strong foundation is critical. Reading instruction during kindergarten through third grade is a key component, in which evidence-based instructional methods and aligned materials provide for student success. But early home and preschool experiences matter as well. From birth through third grade, reading instruction at all ages and levels are important to have great readers and prepared learners in fourth grade.



Birth to Three

Because it becomes harder for the brain to change and learn new skills as children get older, students who begin kindergarten behind their peers have a harder time learning the skills they need to catch up.³ Many of the youngest students begin their schooling already behind their peers because of a lack of learning and resources provided from birth to age 3, particularly for those from families of disadvantaged backgrounds. Investments in birth to age five learning are critical to having every child benefit from a great education. Families can also support their young learners by reading to their children on a regular basis, which helps children understand that pictures and words are meant to be interpreted, expands their vocabulary, and familiarizes them with print.⁴

¹A+ Education Partnership (2021). Rising Above Every Challenge: The 2021 Legislative Playbook.

²Rothwell, Jonathan for the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy (2020). Assessing the Economic Gains of Eradicating Illiteracy Nationally and Regionally in the United States. [LINK](#)

³Center on the Developing Child (2007). The Science of Early Childhood Development (InBrief). Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

⁴National Association for the Education of Young Children. Read Together to Support Early Literacy. [LINK](#)



Pre-K

High-quality preschool environments are linked to better outcomes in literacy, math, and grade retention, and contribute to strong early literacy skills, as well as keep students out of special education programs and from being incarcerated.^{5,6} Research shows that failing to intentionally teach literacy skills in pre-K can widen achievement gaps between children living in poverty and their economically advantaged peers.⁷ While every student is capable of learning to read at a proficient level, action has to be taken by teachers, schools, and leaders to make sure that the instruction required for student success is being provided. Alabama's First Class Pre-K program has a number of stated goals in children's language and literacy development, including knowledge of the alphabet, speaking skills, learning new vocabulary, understanding the sounds of language, and age-appropriate writing skills, which help prepare students for school.⁸



K-3

Achieving grade-level literacy by the end of third grade means that during the early elementary years, high-quality reading instruction is critical. Kindergarten through third-grade reading education is achieved through foundational instruction and intervention, supported by assessment.

- Foundational instruction is received by all students, regardless of skill level. This step includes teacher professional development in the science of reading, placement of reading coaches in schools, and high-quality curricula aligned with the science of reading.
- Intervention occurs when students with specific needs are identified and met through small group or individual instruction, instruction outside the classroom and during the summer, and other parts of an individualized plan.
- Assessments and screeners for dyslexia and other challenges are given early and regularly to let educators and families know when their students need extra support, long before the student is in a position to fail or be held back,⁹ and also show teachers what skills are lacking and how to improve them.

The Current State of Early Literacy in Alabama

The results of the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that Alabama ranked 49th in the nation for reading. On the new statewide ACAP assessment first administered in 2021, less than half, 45% of all students were proficient in ELA (English Language Arts). For economically disadvantaged students, the rate was 32% and only 27% for Black students. Overall, Alabama struggles to ensure that every child can learn to read, but even more alarming reading achievement is even lower for students from historically marginalized communities.¹⁰

⁵ Education Commission of the States (2020). Building a Better K-3 Literacy System. [LINK](#)

⁶ The Center for High-Impact Philanthropy (2015). Invest in a Strong Start for Children: High Return on Investment. [LINK](#)

⁷ Hadley, Elizabeth (2020). Research Review on Early Literacy. [LINK](#)

⁸ Alabama Department of Children's Affairs (2012). Alabama Developmental Standards for Preschool Children. [LINK](#)

⁹ Education Commission of the States (2020). Building a Better K-3 Literacy System. [LINK](#)

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2019 Reading Assessment. [LINK](#)

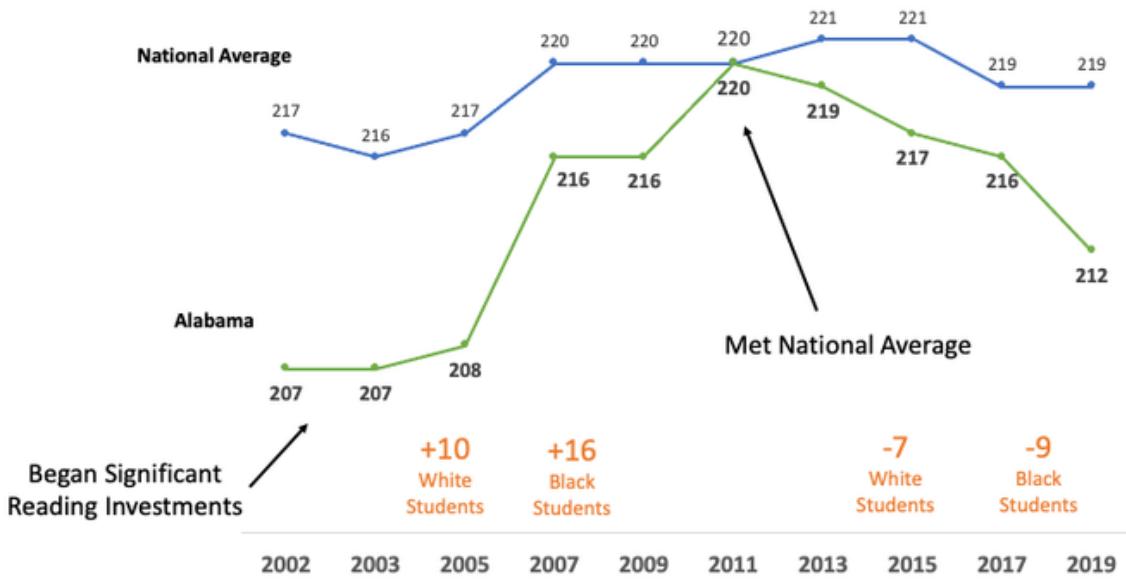
The Alabama Reading Initiative

Literacy is not a new challenge for Alabama, and the state has had success in the past when it made reading a state priority, grounded in a scientifically-based approach. In the late 1990s, the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) was launched to address these issues through two main strategies: investments in teachers' knowledge and skills necessary to effectively teach reading (which is now referred to as the science of reading) and school-based reading coaches in every K-3 school to support teachers and students. Governor Bob Riley, elected in 2002, made improving student reading success a top priority of his administration by significantly expanding funding for ARI during his tenure. In 2002, ARI received \$11 million; in 2005, ARI funding had increased to \$40 million; by 2007, it had reached \$56 million and then continued to grow, reaching a total of \$62 million in 2009 before starting to decline due to the effects of the 2008 recession.

In the graph below, the correlation between ARI funding and NAEP reading scores for Alabama students as compared to the national average is apparent. As funding for the Alabama Reading Initiative grew, so did reading scores in the state. As a state, Alabama made the largest single gain in the history of NAEP data in 2007, followed by the state reaching the national average in 2011.

Reading in Alabama

NAEP 4th Grade Reading 2002-2019



This data clearly shows that smart investments in evidence-based early literacy efforts have an effect on students across the board. During this time, white students made a 10 point jump in reading scores, while Black students made a 16 point jump. However, when funding decreased, leadership changed in the Governor's and State Superintendent's offices, and state priorities shifted, scores began to fall again, this time with Black students falling further behind than White students. This decline continued until 2019, with the passage of the Alabama Literacy Act.

The Alabama Literacy Act

The 2019 Alabama Literacy Act is the state's commitment that every child be reading on grade level by the end of third grade. With broad bipartisan support, the Alabama Legislature passed the Alabama Literacy Act (ALA) to give schools more resources and renew the state's focus on pre-K to third grade reading. The legislation provides funding to do the following:

- Train every K-3 teacher in the science of reading
- Provide regional reading coaches to support the bottom 5% of schools
- High-quality core reading curricula based on the science of reading for teachers to use in the classroom
- Provide screeners and assessments to identify students with dyslexia and other challenges
- Interventions to help struggling readers
- Summer camps focused on literacy to provide additional support
- Require colleges of education to prepare future teachers in the science of reading

All of these provisions are to ensure that students leave third grade as proficient readers. As an accountability measure, all students must be reading on grade level to enter fourth grade or will not be promoted. While some are understandably concerned about retaining students, promoting an unprepared child to fourth grade does not solve the underlying issue. There are, however, "good cause" exemptions in the law to give educators discretion to make the right decision for students who may have disabilities or be English language learners, as well as an option to be promoted through a review of a student's Literacy Portfolio, which provides evidence of mastery of key reading skills. Parents must be involved and kept informed throughout the process.

The Science of Reading

In recent decades, there has been a focus on the "science of reading," a body of research that explains how children learn reading and language. This research shows that children must be actively taught to read, rather than equivocating it to a natural process. This is also called "Structured Literacy." In 2000, the National Reading Panel shared data and best practices on teaching students to read based on scientific evidence. Researchers learned that students need to be taught the five major components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Younger children need to be instructed on alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters, numbers, objects, and colors, writing their own name, and phonological memory. Effective instruction requires teachers to clearly model specific strategies and skills, and systematically pace and sequence the teaching of skills by increasing difficulty.

However, all children are not being taught the skills good readers need as identified by the science of reading. The "whole-language" approach, which gained popularity in the 1970s-80s, immerses children in books and language. This practice is rooted in the idea that learning to read is a natural and unconscious process facilitated by being exposed to written language. However, this is not supported by brain science. Written language is a human invention, and like any other human invention, children must be explicitly taught how to use it. Guessing, a skill emphasized in the whole language approach may work some of the time, but for all children to learn to read proficiently, students need skills that work every time - and that is the science of reading.¹¹ The whole-language approach also continues to be taught in many teacher preparation programs in colleges, which does not equip our new teachers with the skills they need to teach their students to read.

¹¹ Emily Hanford (Host), 2018, Hard Words: Why Aren't Our Kids Being Taught to Read? Educate, APM. [LINK](#)

Equity Challenges

In 2019, the majority of Black fourth-graders (52%) earned a score of “below basic” in reading on the NAEP. 18% were either proficient or advanced. Of White students, only 23% were below basic. 45% were proficient or advanced in reading.¹² On the 2020-2021 administration of the Alabama Comprehensive Assessment Program, 50.6% of all 3rd graders were proficient in English Language Arts (ELA). Of Black students, only 32.6% were proficient and 35.5% of Hispanic 3rd graders were proficient in ELA. For economically disadvantaged students, the proficiency rate was 37.8%.

Cognitive researchers have not found any evidence that the “whole-language” approach is an effective strategy for teaching reading. It actively hurts students from historically marginalized groups by relying on exposure to books, something that these students may have less of. The whole-language approach, or even “balanced literacy,” which attempts to blend whole-language with some phonics, theorizes that students will cultivate a love of reading from immersion in print. However, it is much easier to love something when the student knows how to do it. Using debunked approaches to teaching reading not only locks children out of a love of reading, but a lifetime of using reading skills in their education, on the job, and in their lives. Just as many students learn to read from the balanced literacy approach as can learn how to read without any instruction at all. Teachers must use the science of reading and teach students to read, rather than leaving the learning process to chance and what students may or may not have at home. All children learn to read when they are taught, including our most disadvantaged students, for whom reading skills are all the more important, but right now, they are being failed.¹³

Kindergarten reading performance before and after the science of reading training

The Bethlehem Area School District uses a test called DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills). These numbers show the percentage of students scoring at or above the benchmark composite score.

SCHOOL (low-income%)*	2015	2018
Asa Packer (28%)	47%	95%
Calypso (63%)	35%	100%
Clearview (66%)	51%	100%
Donegan (97%)	30%	69%
Farmersville (28%)	64%	93%
Fountain Hill (90%)	28%	60%
Freemansburg (83%)	51%	93%
Governor Wolf (54%)	36%	76%
Hanover (13%)	70%	100%
James Buchanan (55%)	60%	72%
Lincoln (78%)	32%	83%
Marvine (94%)	40%	72%
Miller Heights (26%)	62%	98%
Spring Garden (41%)	51%	92%
Thomas Jefferson (73%)	75%	92%
William Penn (77%)	42%	81%
DISTRICT (56%)	47%	84%

SOURCE: Bethlehem Area School District. *Low-income is defined as the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, 2017-18.

This graph is from Emily Hanford's reporting on the science of reading, "Hard Words: Why aren't kids being taught to read?" The full story and podcast is linked [here](#).



¹²U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2019 Reading Assessment. [LINK](#)

¹³Emily Hanford (Host), 2018, Hard Words: Why Aren't Our Kids Being Taught to Read? Educate, APM. [LINK](#)

A+ Policy Recommendations

The following are A+ policy recommendations for ensuring that every child has a high-quality education in literacy:

1 Continued funding and full support for the Alabama Literacy Act - As seen in the later years of the Alabama Reading Initiative, a decrease in funding and support for programs that encourage high-quality literacy instruction in the state can have serious consequences on student achievement. It is imperative that the ALA continues to be a priority for state leaders so that Alabama students do not fall behind. More specifically, the below-mentioned features of the ALA need to be especially supported:

- Train every K-3 teacher in the science of reading, but prioritize training for teachers at schools in the bottom 45% of reading achievement. - Training every teacher in the science of reading lays the foundation for every Alabama student to receive proven, science-based instruction in literacy.
- Provide funding for additional regional literacy coaches at schools in the bottom 45% of reading achievement. - Providing reading coaches for the schools that need them the most allows students at the highest risk of not earning a proficient score in reading to receive the assistance they need.
- Fully implement the requirement that all Teacher Preparation Programs at Alabama colleges teach the science of reading - All new teachers should have a strong foundation in the science of reading from day one.
- Provide funding for vetted and approved formative assessments, core reading programs, and interventions aligned to the science of reading so teachers have the evidence-based tools they need to effectively teach their students to read.

2 Implementing the Action Plan for Literacy - The Alabama Committee on Grade-Level Reading published a 2020 revision of its Alabama Action Plan for Literacy, which provides practical action steps and resources to support high-quality literacy instruction for all learners, birth through 12th grade. It also includes specific expectations for K-3 literacy instruction, assessment, intervention, and professional learning to meet the requirements of the Alabama Literacy Act.

3 Expand and Support First Class Pre-K - Alabama's First Class Pre-K program provides high-quality early childhood education to 4-year-olds, preparing them for success in Kindergarten.





A+ drives improvements in public education for every Alabama student. We set and deliver high expectations by advocating for policies, practices, and investments that advance learning and by partnering with schools to build the capacity of teachers and leaders.

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