Policy Brief: California's Early Literacy Crisis

EdVoice INSTITUTE | DECODING DYSLEXIA | CALIFORNIA READING COALITION | Families In Schools+ | 21st CENTURY ALLIANCE

A COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTION TO A COMPLEX PROBLEM

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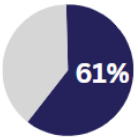
1,739,428 students are in Kindergarten through 3rd grade in California.[1]



are from **low-income families.**[2]

75% are Black or Latino
34% are English learners

3rd-graders are on grade level in English Language Arts (ELA).[3]

2 in 10 low-income Black

3 in 10 low-income Latino

2 in 10 English learners

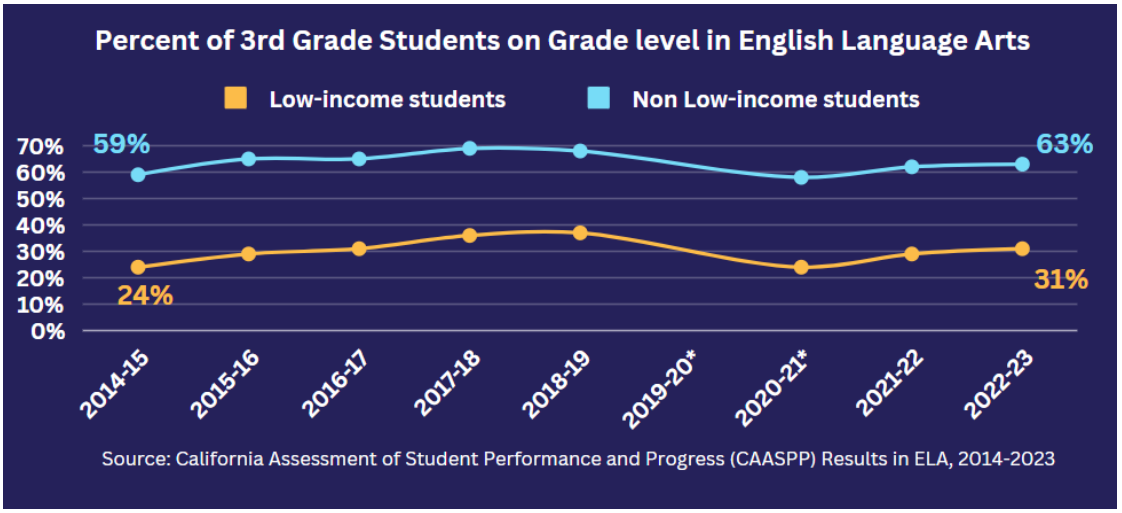
2 in 10 Students with disabilities

students are on grade level in ELA in 3rd grade.[4]

These rates have remained

mostly flat over the last eight years.

Progress in ELA has been too slow.[5]



These results are unacceptable when the stakes are so high...

California has one of the **lowest adult literacy rates** in the nation.[6]

approximately **28% of California adults** are not literate.[7]

Adults with limited literacy lack the skills to navigate daily life.

They are **more at risk for remaining in poverty, less likely to be employable, more socially isolated, and less likely to live healthy lives.**[8]

The Need

Urgent Action on Early Literacy Outcomes

Far too many children in California are not reading on grade level by the end of the third grade and finish elementary school without the literacy and language development skills they need to be successful academically in middle and high school. Most of the children falling behind are from low-income communities, and are more likely to be Black or Latino, English learners, or students with disabilities. This inequity, which has continued to fail the state's most vulnerable students, is a serious moral imperative that California must address. Improving access to high-quality literacy and reading instruction is a fundamental civil right that the state must act upon immediately.

In this brief, we explore policy solutions that the state can take in the early stages of literacy development to address these inequities. Our focus is on ensuring that students in early grades–transitional kindergarten (TK) through 3rd grade–are caught up and on grade level and that older students–4th grade and onward–are set up with the literacy skills to excel academically.

Prior Work

California has made progress, but there is more to do

The state has taken several actions in recent years to address early literacy challenges.

Some key initiatives and policies include:

- **2021:** Passed and enacted the Early Literacy Support Block Grant, awarding funds to local education agencies (LEAs) with the highest percentage of under-performing students in English Language Arts (ELA).[9]
- **2021:** Passed and in the process of implementing SB 488 (Rubio), which requires the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) to update its standards for the preparation of teaching candidates for reading and literacy instruction, review teacher preparation programs progress in meeting updated standards, and develop a new literacy teaching performance assessment to replace the current Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA) by 2025.
- **2023:** Provided grants to high-needs schools to hire literacy coaches (will replicate in 2024).
- **2023:** Appointed new California Department of Education literacy directors.
- **2023:** Passed SB 114 requiring universal screening for reading difficulties, including risk of dyslexia, for K-2 public school students.

While these actions do constitute progress, they fall short of comprehensive reform. The data clearly shows that students across the state are still struggling with reading. We must take bolder actions to address inequities and create a clear, comprehensive strategy for ensuring all students are proficient, skilled readers by the end of third grade and equipped to succeed in K-12 and beyond.

The Solution

A Comprehensive Strategy Anchored in the Science of Reading

It is time for California to pass comprehensive legislation on early literacy that puts the state on the path to ensuring all children are skilled readers by the end of third grade. The research is clear about how children learn to read. Decades of interdisciplinary research - often called the science of reading - shows what it takes to ensure students develop strong literacy skills.[10]

The science of reading underscores the importance of developing skills in five key areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, oral language and vocabulary skills, and reading comprehension.[11] It is grounded in scientific research about the way our brains process information, recognize word patterns, and develop language fluency.[12]

In the last ten years, over 30 states have committed to implementing literacy reform grounded in the science of reading. These states have passed comprehensive legislation that often requires science of reading aligned curriculum and instructional materials and training teachers on the science of reading, mandates for universal screening and evidence-based interventions, introduces the science of reading into teacher preparation programs requirements, and supports to help with effective implementation. California has yet to adopt this kind of extensive science of reading policy agenda. While standalone efforts have been made to address that teacher candidates are trained in effective means of teaching literacy and the state has adopted universal screening to identify students with reading difficulties, more comprehensive reforms are needed to ensure students have equitable access to effective literacy instruction.

A Note on English Learners

The unfortunate reality is that most states that have enacted comprehensive early literacy reform have not designed their policies with the needs of English learners in mind.[13] California has already built the foundation and momentum for this work introducing the English Learner Roadmap and integrating the English language development (ELD) and English Language Arts (ELA) standards. It is essential that any comprehensive early literacy policy is grounded in research on what works for all students, particularly the over one million English learners across the state.

Oral language development, in combination with literacy instruction grounded in the elements of the science of reading–phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension–has clearly proven benefits for English learners and native English speakers.[14] It is essential that any literacy reform in California highlights the assets of multilingualism and makes the connection between oral language proficiency and literacy development for English learners. Reforms to curriculum and instructional materials, professional development, teacher preparation, and identification of additional instructional supports for students should be grounded in evidence-based research on effective language and literacy development for English learners.

The Ask

Help Us Pass a Comprehensive Early Literacy Policy Agenda

Thoughtful and systemic early literacy reform will take a bold policy plan that ensures our teachers are equipped and supported in teaching our children to become proficient, skilled readers by the end of third grade. It will require the state to go further than recommending policies and practices to local districts, and mandate them in some cases. Urgent action is needed to reverse the deep inequities around reading for Latino, Black, and English learner children from low-income communities across the state. It is critical that the state adopts a comprehensive policy agenda to ensure that all children in California classrooms, not just a select privileged few, receive literacy instruction grounded in the science of reading. The policies proposed here are designed to work together over time to build and sustain effective and equitable reading instruction.

We have put together a comprehensive policy agenda that, if implemented, will help California build and sustain excellent and equitable reading instruction. **These recommendations are grounded in national studies and evidence from other states that have implemented comprehensive and systemic literacy reforms.**[15]

The agenda **centers on four priorities** with overarching accountability and transparency measures:

1. Access to instructional materials that adhere to the science of reading;
2. Professional development and training for current teachers;
3. Effective preparation and credentialing for teacher candidates; and
4. Universal screening along with progress monitoring and interventions for struggling readers.

Instructional Materials

Teachers and students must have equitable access to high-quality literacy instructional materials[16] that adhere to the science of reading. Today, too many students in California are not being taught with materials that adhere to the science of reading. California must redesign state and local adoption processes to ensure only evidence-based materials that adhere to the science of reading are approved and used. Additionally, all approved materials must specifically address the unique needs and assets of English learners(ELs).

Policy Recommendations

1. Direct the State Board of Education (SBE) to create an updated, state-approved list that ensures all basic and supplementary state-adopted English language arts (ELA), English language development (ELD), and reading instructional materials for TK-8
2. Require districts to use basic ELA, ELD, and reading instructional materials that have been adopted by the state; districts that want to adopt “off list” must be granted a waiver from the state

Professional Development and Training

We need to ensure all teachers and administrators have a strong understanding of the science of reading, so the state must invest in a systematic approach to training teachers and implementing evidence-based curriculum and instructional materials. While it will take several years to accomplish a high-quality statewide training program, this is essential to ensure that literacy and reading teachers, as well as those who support literacy and reading teachers, have the knowledge and tools needed so all students become proficient in literacy and reading by the end of third grade. This should include ensuring that teachers and administrators understand language development instructional practices that support bilingual and biliterate development for English learners.

Policy Recommendations

1. Direct the California Department of Education (CDE) to create a list of approved science of reading professional development courses that districts, schools, and educators can select from
2. Require all teachers, reading and literacy coaches/specialists, and principals/school leaders in elementary schools to satisfactorily complete training from the approved science of reading professional development list
3. Require any state-sponsored literacy specialist, lead agency, and/or external trainers identified in the "statewide system of support"[18] to demonstrate proficiency in the science of reading and evidence-based curriculum and instructional materials

Teacher Preparation and Credentialing

All newly certified teachers must be trained in the principles and practices of the science of reading to ensure they are well-prepared to teach reading effectively. This means making changes to California's teacher preparation programs. Under SB 488,[19] the state has increased literacy teaching standards and teaching performance expectations (TPEs), but more actions must be taken to ensure compliance with these standards and requirements. Similar to the recommendations around professional development and training, care should be taken in evaluating the implementation of the new standards and requirements, particularly to ensure that teacher candidates receive training around the practices of science of reading, including the integration of English language development into English Language Arts and across the school day to build on students' cultural and linguistic assets.

Policy Recommendations

1. Effectively implement SB 488
2. Provide funding for the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) to hire in-house literacy experts for compliance monitoring
3. Promote training of teacher preparation faculty to build capacity around the science of reading
4. Revamp and strengthen the accreditation review process for literacy/reading standards
5. Update and strengthen literacy standards and requirements for reading and literacy specialists/coaches

Universal Screening, Progress Monitoring, and Interventions

During the 2023 session, the Governor signed into law a requirement for universal screening for K-2 public school students of reading difficulties, including risk of dyslexia—a major milestone. Universal screening is the start of a process that must include ongoing progress monitoring, with some students needing extra time outside their classroom for more intensive interventions.

Policy Recommendations

1. Effectively implement SB 114 (universal screening for reading difficulties)[20]
2. Require evidence-based, science of reading interventions, along with frequent progress monitoring, for students with reading difficulties
3. Provide additional time during the school day, after school, and over the summer to students that are significantly behind in reading

Other Important Considerations

Family Engagement

Our comprehensive science of reading early literacy policy agenda will be more impactful if we authentically involve families. They must receive accurate and frequent communication about their child's and school's literacy progress (e.g. information on curriculum and instructional materials, information on student progress, information on literacy resources, and accessible report cards that provide transparent and accessible information on student reading level), including how to interpret assessment data and help develop individual reading plans if needed. Additionally, schools need to leverage parents and caregivers as partners in helping their children to become proficient readers by providing additional evidence-based reading activities and resources, including technology-based games and programs, to extend learning at home. Afterschool and summer literacy and reading programs, which can be funded through existing expanded learning and community schools allocations, must be easily accessible to all families who have children identified as struggling readers.

Accountability, Transparency, and Continual Learning

Investing in a statewide science of reading early literacy policy agenda will require significant political will, strong statewide advocacy support, and dedicated resources. There must be transparent accountability mechanisms for monitoring the impact of this agenda. Accountability mechanisms will help determine whether the investments are successful and provide insight into which policies and practices are working. Data from budget allocations, programs, initiatives, and statewide efforts must be routinely collected, analyzed, and publicly reported to hold the state accountable for increased literacy and reading outcomes. In addition, effective systems must be developed statewide to facilitate sharing of best practices to help districts and schools learn from each other and improve their practices.

Closing Thoughts

Literacy is a fundamental civil right and should be handled with the same urgency as any other social injustice. This is an incredible moment of opportunity for California to take action on literacy and implement substantive reform. In a state that prides itself on its innovation and progressive values, it is unacceptable that we have continued to perpetuate inequities and fail so many low-income, Black and Latino, and English learner students and students with disabilities for so long. We urge leaders to implement the comprehensive agenda outlined above and push for bold policy reforms that improve equitable access to effective literacy instruction.

The Authors

This brief was written in partnership with EdVoice Institute, the California Reading Coalition, Decoding Dyslexia California, Families in Schools, and the 21st Century Alliance. Leaders at these organizations have come together over the last six months and formed the California Early Literacy Coalition. The coalition is committed to influencing changes to state policy so that all children in California achieve literacy by the end of elementary school.

Endnotes

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