



# Early Literacy Success Strategies FAQs

Background on [TalentFirst's interactive report](#)  
on Michigan's Grade 3 reading proficiency

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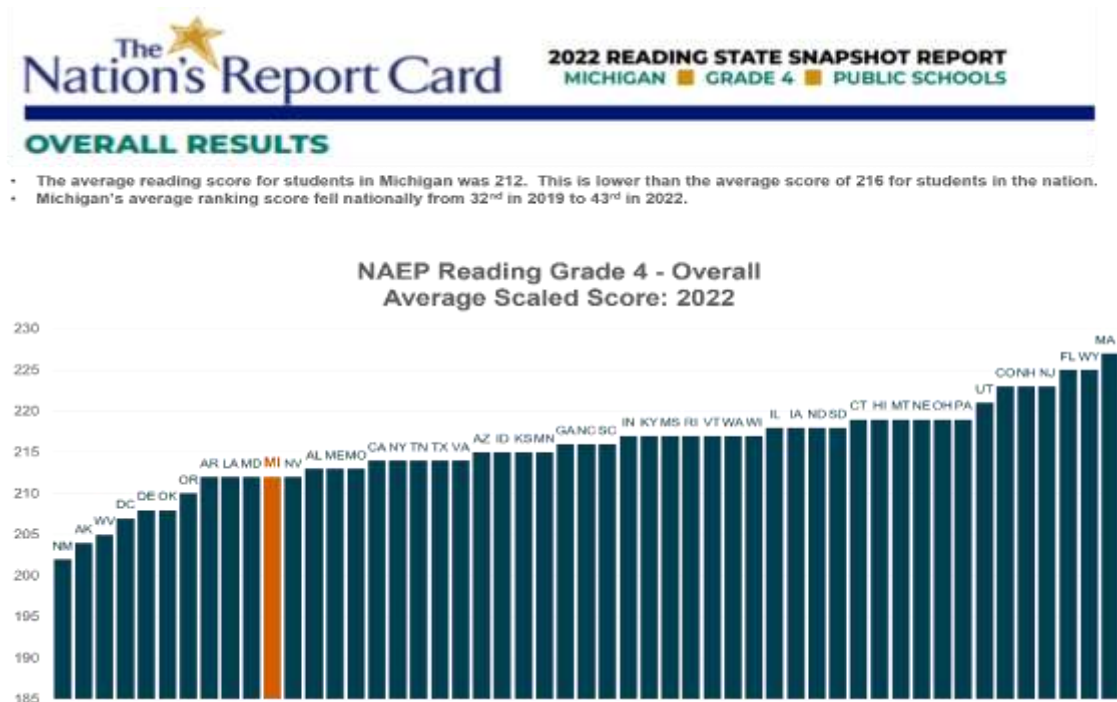
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## Why publish this data?

- Children must master literacy in early elementary grades if they are to graduate high school ready for college and career. That's why TalentFirst has set a goal that 80% of 3rd graders being proficient in reading. We have published this information to make parents, school board members, educators, and policy makers aware of how their school or district compares to ensure all kids have high-quality early literacy instruction and move Michigan from among the worst to a leader nationally.
- Pandemic-era learning loss was felt nationwide, reversing decades of progress for students. But it would be a mistake to blame those setbacks and Michigan's relative performance on the pandemic.
- The fact is Michigan continues to lag more than half of the states in reading and math proficiency.
  - To take just one example, the [2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#) statewide sample for fourth-grade reading, Michigan's average score ranking fell from 32<sup>nd</sup> in 2019 to 43<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>1</sup>



- Results from the state's own M-STEP standardized test are not any more encouraging: In 2023, just 40.9% of third graders statewide scored proficient or better.
- That data should be setting off alarms for lawmakers, policy leaders, educators, school boards and parents across the state.

<sup>1</sup> NAEP tests are given to a sample of students of each state in the nation. In 2022, the tests were administered to about 2.6% of Michigan fourth and eighth grade students in approximately 260 school buildings statewide. In addition to the fourth-grade reading ranking of 43<sup>rd</sup>, eighth-grade reading from 28<sup>th</sup> in 2019 to 31<sup>st</sup>. Average scores for fourth-grade math improved from 42<sup>nd</sup> to 36<sup>th</sup>, while eighth-grade math scores improved from 28<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup>.

- We want every West Michigan school community to recognize the urgent need to improve proficiency of our students.
  - This begins with awareness.
- Failing to act does a disservice to a generation of students and the future of our communities.

## What if my school is in the blue or the green zone? Does that mean everything is OK?

- Far from it. Getting to “average” – or even above average – is no longer good enough, regardless of rates of economic disadvantage.
- The need for improvement statewide has never been greater because we are falling behind. In national testing, Michigan’s average fourth-grade score is in the bottom quarter of states.

## How is this different from all the other test score data? What does this add to the conversation?

- This interactive report is designed as a tool for parents, educators and school boards.
- It provides building-level information about reading proficiency – with the important context of economic status.

## How should this information be used?

- The emphasis is not on shortcomings, but solutions – and these start with educators, parents, school boards, community members and policymakers asking the right questions. For example:

### **Questions that parents and school board members can ask about their schools:**

- What literacy coaching and professional development have your teachers received that have positively impacted student outcomes? What is being done with those strategies that are not increasing student’s reading proficiency?
- What reading programs and assessments are you currently using? What changes have you seen in student outcomes with these reading programs? What percentage of the students in your district are proficient in these various assessments?
- Has the district evaluated its reading curriculum to ensure it is aligned with the findings from the Science of Reading? If you have, are you seeing an increase of students who are reading at grade level? If not, are you evaluating what is not working and adjusting instructional practices?
- What classrooms or schools in your district have higher levels of proficiency than typical? What are they doing differently in their literacy instruction? Are you evaluating their practices to model in other classrooms? If you’re not sure, would you ask some questions to find out?

- What things are you considering doing differently to move the needle in your district? How can I help? Have you listened to the podcast Sold a Story? If not, I'd like to send it to you then schedule a time that we can talk about it so I can get your thoughts and input.

#### **Questions that business leaders and policymakers can ask:**

- Michigan has expanded its investment in early literacy efforts, growing from \$29.9 million in fiscal year 2018-2019 to \$72.4 million in the latest budget. And the state is allocating money for literacy coaches, additional instruction time and teacher training to help literacy efforts. Has this resulted in an increase in reading proficiency in your district?
- How has your district utilized COVID relief funds to address learning loss? Are those strategies showing an increase in student academic performance?
- Based on the 3rd grade reading law, how many 3rd grade students in your district qualified to be held back or were passed on? What was done in prekindergarten through 2nd grade to ensure they were reading proficiently?

### **What kind of strategies can be put into action?**

- Because we want the publication of these test results to be constructive, we also are highlighting strategies to support action. Here are some examples of our recommendations, based on TalentFirst's longstanding partnership with and support for K-12 educators:

#### **Schools should evaluate their reading curricula and replace it with evidence-based curricula if not already present.**

- [EdReports](#) empowers districts with free reviews of K-12 instructional materials and reports that offer evidence-rich, comprehensive information about a program's alignment to the standards and other indicators of quality.
- [What Works Clearing House](#) has been a central and trusted source of scientific evidence on educational programs, practices and policies that are focused on what works in education.
- The [Reading League's curriculum evaluation tool](#) provides guidelines to evaluate how well a curriculum aligns with the findings from the Science of Reading.

#### **Teachers should be supported in selecting evidence-based curriculum, along with professional development to implement new literacy instructional practices.**

- [The National Center on Intensive Intervention](#) has developed tools to assist in selecting academic assessment tools and interventions that meet standards for technical rigor and address specific needs.

#### **School leaders should provide teachers with high-quality coaching and ongoing professional development aligned to research-supported literacy instructional practices.**

- Adopt the leading practices for early literacy that are grounded in the [Science of Reading](#) and identified by the [General Education Leadership Network](#) (GELN), the [Literacy Essentials](#) and [LETRS](#) training.



- Expand literacy instructional time through after school learning, summer school and research-based [proven tutoring programs](#).

## About the dashboard and data

### How are 'reading proficiency' and 'economically disadvantaged' defined?

- **Reading proficiency:** The percentage of students reading at grade level as established by the Michigan Department of Education
- **Economically disadvantaged:** The percentage of students who participate in the free or reduced-price lunch program at school.

### How are schools grouped below or above average? How were proficiency categories calculated?

- We started with the state average for third-grade proficiency level on the M-STEP test for English Language Arts, adjusted for rates of economic disadvantage. Performance groupings (Below Average, Average, Above Average) were assigned to each school based on how far its proficiency rate was from the trend line.
- 'Above Average' schools scored at least .75 standard deviations above the trend line, while 'Below Average' schools scored more than .75 standard deviations below the trend line.
  - Learn more about [calculating standard deviations](#).
- Performance categories can vary from 2018-19 to 2021-22, even if a building's proficiency rate remained the same, because the statewide average fell in 2021-22 (from 45.1% to 41.6%)

### What are the M-STEP proficiency levels and score ranges?

- Performance levels are Advanced, Proficient, Partially Proficient, Not Proficient.

		2022 M-STEP Performance Level Scale Score Ranges			
Subject	Grade	Level 1 Not Proficient	Level 2 Partially Proficient	Level 3 Proficient	Level 4 Advanced
ELA	3	1203-1279	1280-1299	1300-1316	1317-1357

#### Performance Level (PL) Descriptors

**Not Proficient:** The student's performance is not yet proficient and indicates minimal understanding and application of key academic content standards defined for Michigan students. The student needs intensive intervention and support to improve achievement.

**Partially Proficient:** The student's performance is not yet proficient, indicating a partial understanding and application of key academic content standards defined for Michigan students. The student needs assistance to improve achievement.

**Proficient:** The student's performance indicates understanding and application of key academic content standards defined for Michigan students. The student needs continued support to maintain and improve proficiency.

**Advanced:** The student's performance exceeds academic content standards and indicates substantial understanding and application of key concepts defined for Michigan students. The student needs support to continue to excel.

### Why don't I see my school listed?

- Buildings with less than 50 students have been removed from the dataset to preserve teacher-level confidentiality.
- Others were suppressed in the original data in compliance with the federal [Family Education and Privacy Act](#) and the more robust disclosure avoidance rules enacted by [Center for Education Performance and Information](#) and the Michigan Department of Education.

### Why does the data omit two school years – 2019-20 and 2020-21?

- Due to the pandemic, the M-STEP was not completed in 2019-20, and the assessments saw a lower completion rate in 2020-21.
- The 2018-19 and 2021-22 results are included for comparison as this is before and after the pandemic disrupted school attendance.

### Why include economic status?

- Although not the only factor, poverty has a negative correlation to academic achievement. This has been shown through decades of research.
- There are insights to be gained from those schools that outperform their economic peers – just as there are reasons for constituents of underperforming schools to ask questions and support strategies for improvement.
- Across the board, we see examples of schools outperforming their economic peers – just as we see examples of under-performing schools at every economic level.
  - Looking at the data verticals – grouping schools by economic status – we see wide variations in academic proficiency.
  - Looking at the data horizontals – grouping schools by reading proficiency – many schools are beating the odds based on their economic status.
  - We need to explore these variations and learn from them to help all students succeed.

### What else plays a role in reading proficiency?

- The research – and the data presented here – make clear that poverty is not the only factor.
- Many other factors play a role in the success of students: parent/caregiver involvement, building-level and district-level leadership, research supported curriculum, instructional quality, classroom resources, professional development.

### Who was involved in the development of this information?

- We sought input from multiple stakeholders, including parents, school board members, researchers, superintendents, principals, literacy coaches and teachers.



- This is a problem for the entire state to address, so we want to engage as many stakeholders as possible. The goal is to be constructive, not destructive.

## How should I look at this data – on a building level or a wider view?

- We intentionally organized the data in a way that allows review on three levels, representing different levels of responsibility and comparison opportunities.
  - Sorting results by ISD/RESA provides a regional picture, an overview of how larger geographic areas are performing when taking economic status into account. This could be particularly useful for policymakers and business leaders.
  - District-level data covers the scope of governance by a school board and top administration. Comparison of this data at this level will be useful to school boards and district leaders as well as local business leaders.
  - It's necessary to be transparent about individual building outcomes to provide multiple opportunities for improvement. This helps identify programs that are outperforming for the economic level, for example, or vice versa.

## I thought Michigan was investing in K12 education. Why are we not seeing results?

- Yes, the state has increased K12 funding, including with the latest budget.
- TalentFirst has consistently supported investing in resources for vulnerable populations – such as expansion of the Great Start Readiness Program to serve all at-risk preschoolers, greater per pupil funding for K-12 students and additional funding for at-risk students.

### Examples of how TalentFirst has supported K12 education

- [Some of our recent advocacy successes](#)
- See why [early literacy has long been a priority](#)
- Specific initiatives we have supported
  - Reading Now Network (RNN)
  - Reach Out and Read
  - Expanding Great Start Readiness Programs
  - Increasing K-12 per pupil funding
- Other states have had a comprehensive early literacy strategy and they are getting results. Michigan needs to follow their lead or fall further behind.

## What other states are doing

- Many states recently enacted laws or rules designed to ensure that teachers are well versed in evidence-based reading instruction. At the same time, other states have been more aggressive in adopting proven strategies to improve reading proficiency.
  - [Reading Instruction: A Flurry of New State Laws](#)
  - [More States are Making the 'Science of Reading' a Policy Priority](#)
- More highlights:
  - Mississippi passed a series of laws that overhauled the state's approach to teaching reading. In 2013 they were ranked 49th in the nation and in 2019 their student reading proficiency rank rose to 29th.
  - Arkansas made the cueing method illegal and schools that violate the law could lose 10 percent of their state funding.
  - North Carolina passed a new law that requires teachers be taught, and use, techniques that are grounded in the Science of Reading.
  - Connecticut passed a law requiring schools to use evidence-based reading materials, to be selected from an approved list drawn up by a department of education committee.

## Wasn't the third-grade reading law intended to help kids learn to read?

- Yes, that was the intent of the legislation that was signed into law in 2016 and first implemented for the 2020-21 school year.
- Under the law, similar to others adopted around the country, third-graders who are reading more than one year behind grade level on the state's standardized test, the M-STEP, were recommended to be held back in grade.
  - In other words, a third-grade student reading at more than a year below grade level at the end of the school year could enter fourth grade the following year more than two years below grade level.
- In 2023, lawmakers removed the retention requirement.
  - The law contained many exemptions, and districts had been promoting most students even if they are eligible to be retained.
  - According to Michigan State University's Education Policy Innovation Collaborative: "In 2020-21, districts were twice as likely to retain Black students than White students, whereas, in 2021-22, districts were 2.4 times as likely to retain Black than White students."
  - In 2021-2022, districts statewide retained 545 students – 0.6% of all tested students, although 5.8% were eligible to be retained.

- The data shows racial disparity in which students were retained – Black students were retained at higher rates than any other race or ethnicity. These disparities widened between 2020-21 and 2021-22.
- [EPIC Report: Preliminary Read by Grade Three Retention Estimates](#)

## Is this data meant to shame low-performing or poorer districts and schools?

- On the contrary, the data shows schools across the board are underperforming compared to their top-performing peers. There are lessons to be learned from those schools that outperform their economic peers.
- When you control for poverty, some schools are not doing as well as some may think while others are performing better.
- Our focus is to ensure every child learns to read by third grade.
- When you look at Michigan's performance, it's clear dramatic improvement is needed, but it could be worse if not for the dedication and hard work of teachers.
- Poverty impacts academic performance, but so does parent/caregiver engagement. Beginning to read at an early age to a child has a big impact.
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress and M-STEP scores show Michigan has a big problem and the efforts to date have failed to address the need in local districts and statewide.
- Districts have attempted many things to confront this, but they have been of insufficient intensity compared to the problem.
- Other states have had a comprehensive early literacy strategy and they are getting results. Michigan needs to follow their lead or fall further behind.

## Aren't teaching colleges preparing educators with research-supported literacy instructional practices?

- They are teaching a variety of reading instruction methods, some evidence-based and some not evidence-based.
- In 2019, a nationally representative [EdWeek Research Center survey](#) of higher education and K-2 teachers found that:
  - Marie Clay and Fountas and Pinnell are two of the researchers that are most likely to be introduced in postsecondary courses even though their programs have faced criticism that the instructional methods they use don't align with, or in some cases contradict, the research on how to develop strong readers.

- 65 percent of postsecondary instructors teach the three-cueing system, even though cognitive scientists and neuroscientists have found that guessing rather than reading isn't the most effective way for beginning readers to learn how to decode printed text.
- 65 percent of teachers said they felt prepared to teach early reading when they finished their pre-service preparation.

### **What happens when student teachers and new teachers apply their studies to classrooms?**

- Even when aspiring teachers are taught science-based methods in higher education classrooms, the applications of those methods are not always effectively transferred by students to their practicum or student teaching placements in schools.
  - Further, once hired, first year teachers may receive little or no quality professional development around reading instruction strategies.
- Students and new teachers are often handed a purchased curriculum that has some instructional strategies, but they are lacking supported and guided practice and coaching in school settings with experienced, effective educators to implement said curriculum and strategies.
- Teachers typically want to follow a curriculum purchased by the district, assuming the instructional strategies were backed by research.
- Deploying science-backed methods is a teacher training/time issue more than a willingness issue.

## **What are the most-used ELA curricula? Are they supported by research?**

### **What is found nationwide**

- The 2019 [EdWeek Research Center survey](#) of K-2 early reading and special education teachers found that:
  - 43 percent use Fountas and Pinnell's Leveled Literacy Intervention, the intervention companion to Fountas and Pinnell Classroom.
  - 19 percent use Marie Clay's Reading Recovery program.
  - 16 percent of teachers used the Calkin's Units of Study for Teaching Reading that heavily relies on the three-cueing system.
  - 75 percent indicated that they teach the three-cueing system.
  - 70 percent place an emphasis on phonics when teaching students to read.
- Fountas & Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention is the program most frequently used in elementary schools.

- Students at the lowest levels of this program read books with predictable sentence structures and pictures that illustrate words, rather than so-called “decodable” books that encourage students to sound out words.
- Clay and Calkin’s reading programs rely heavily on the three-cueing system.
  - Three-cueing is an approach that tells students to use pictures and context to identify unfamiliar words. Critics contend that this encourages guessing rather than reading and that it was developed based on the inefficient habits of struggling readers: Children should instead sound out new words, a trait associated with proficient readers.
- These programs have faced criticism from educators and researchers that the instructional methods they use don’t align with, or in some cases contradict, the research on how to develop strong readers.

### What is found in Michigan

- A 2022 EPIC [survey](#) of K-5 teachers in Michigan found that:
  - Teachers reported using 464 different ELA curriculum resources, and the average individual teacher reported using multiple ELA curriculum resources.
  - There is limited information about the 10 core ELA curriculum resources Michigan teachers most often reported using. Notably, many teachers report using materials that do not meet or only partially meet standards according to EdReports.
  - 31% of teachers indicated that they are using Fountas & Pinnell resources and 17% of teachers are using Units of Study that according to EdReports do not meet expectations for text quality, text complexity, or alignment to standards.

### What does the research say about curricula?

- Education Week report: [The Most Popular Reading Programs Aren’t Backed by Science](#)
- EdReports provides a summary of alignment and usability of the materials for Fountas and Pinnell Classroom and Units of Study, generally finding they do not meet the expectations for text quality and complexity and alignment to the standards.
- [Detail on findings for Fountas & Pinnell Classroom ELA](#)
- [Detail on findings for Units of Study ELA](#)

### How can schools select high-quality curricula and best practices?

- While no ELA curriculum is perfect, districts should carefully examine the resources teachers using to determine whether these resources are:
  - Aligned with research on literacy instruction
  - Address ELA standards, and

- Recommend instructional strategies that are appropriate for a given age group or grade level.
- When curriculum resources do not meet these criteria, they should be replaced with evidence-based resources.

### **Where can resources be found to evaluate curricula and instructional practices?**

- EdReports empowers districts with free reviews of K-12 instructional materials and reports that offer evidence-rich, comprehensive information about a program's alignment to the standards and other indicators of quality.
- [What Works Clearing House](#) has been a central and trusted source of scientific evidence on educational programs, practices and policies that are focused on what works in education.
- [Literacy Essentials](#) are frequently used as a best practice, but it comes down to highly effective coaching, frequency of coaching, time for teachers to plan, professional development, professional learning communities/teams. This includes:
  - The accountability of a district to provide consistent coaching and professional ongoing development.
  - The accountability of a teacher to implement these strategies to increase reading proficiency.
  - The teachers/buildings to use frequent and multiple data points to change instruction.

## **Why is literacy coaching important?**

- According to the [March, 2023 EPIC Report | Michigan's Literacy Coaching Landscape](#):
  - Literacy coaching is a key mechanism through which Michigan's Read by Grade Three Law aims to improve literacy instruction for K-3 students throughout the state. The state began funding early literacy coaches at the ISD level as part of the law and since 2019-20, there is an allocated \$31.5 million per year for ISD Early Literacy Coaches.
  - The survey data from K-3 teachers indicates that many teachers are not receiving literacy coaching, with just a third saying they received coaching in the 2021-22 school year. Thus, while Michigan's literacy coaches work with a large number of educators, they are still unable to reach most of the K-3 teachers in the state.
  - In EPIC's [Year One](#) and [Year Two](#) Read by Grade Three Law Reports indeed show that just 13% of K-3 teachers in 2019-20 and 10% in 2020-21 received literacy coaching from an ISD Early Literacy Coach. Thus, teachers may have wanted literacy coaching but were unable to access it.
  - EPIC's final report recommendations for policymakers and practitioners are to:
    - Increase Funding for Literacy Coaching
    - Integrate Literacy Coaches more purposefully into ISDs, Districts, and Schools





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