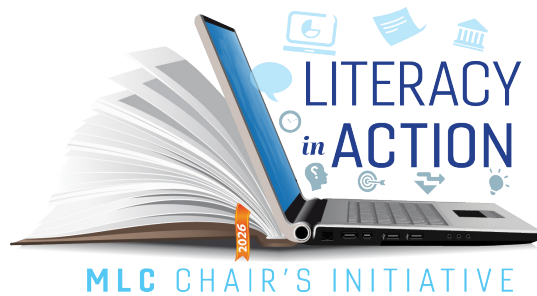


LITERACY IN ACTION

How Midwest States are Providing New Tools
for Students and Teachers to Succeed



MIDWEST



2026 MLC Chair
Minnesota Sen. Mary Kunesh

“Literacy in Action” is the 2026 Midwestern Legislative Conference Chair’s Initiative of Minnesota Sen. Mary Kunesh. This Issue Brief was produced by the Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments in support of the Chair’s Initiative.

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The Midwestern Legislative Conference (MLC) is a nonpartisan association of all legislators representing 11 states — Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin — and the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. The provinces of Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario are affiliate members.

CSG Midwest provides staff support to the MLC. It is one of four regional offices of The Council of State Governments. Founded in 1933, CSG is the nation’s largest nonpartisan organization serving all three branches of state elected and appointed officials. The mission of CSG is to champion excellence in state government.



**Midwestern
Legislative
Conference**



Introduction:

States Take Lead on Advancing Literacy

A child's ability to effectively comprehend the written language, especially during the early grades of primary school, is an essential prerequisite for later academic work and success.

For example, a longitudinal data analysis conducted by the American Institutes for Research in 2023 found that students at the greatest risk of underperforming in assessments like the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are those who continually struggle to develop certain literacy skills – including phonological awareness and site word recognition – during kindergarten and first grade.

"A high percentage of students without mastery of alphabetic principle at the start of kindergarten (57 percent) and students without phonological awareness by the end of grade 1 (85 percent) was predicted to perform below the NAEP Basic level in grade 4."

Multiple studies show that struggles for these young learners persist throughout their academic careers and beyond. In response, particularly amid falling testing scores in recent years, states across the country are making a series of policy changes and investments to redesign how literacy education is taught during the crucial early learning years.

Looking for a turnaround

Nationwide, average reading scores among fourth-graders have been continually dropping since 2017.

In looking at the latest results from 2024, some states in the Midwest have seen average scores drop by 10 or more points over the past seven years. In this region, the lone exception to the drop in reading scores has been Indiana. That state's average score of 220 was not only higher than its average score reported in 2022, but also significantly above the national average.

Indiana education leaders have credited this improvement to the state's "all-hands-on-deck" approach to addressing what they called a "literacy crisis." Its response included a public-private partnership with the Lilly Endowment that invested \$170 million to update curricula in teacher preparation programs, instruct veteran teachers on the "science of reading," and reward schools for implementation. Recent laws in Indiana also have sought to improve the early identification of struggling young readers and provide them with evidence-based interventions.

Meanwhile, the broader downward trend in reading test scores (on NAEP and/or state-administered assessments) has caused states to re-examine the pedagogy behind contemporary K-12 literacy education.

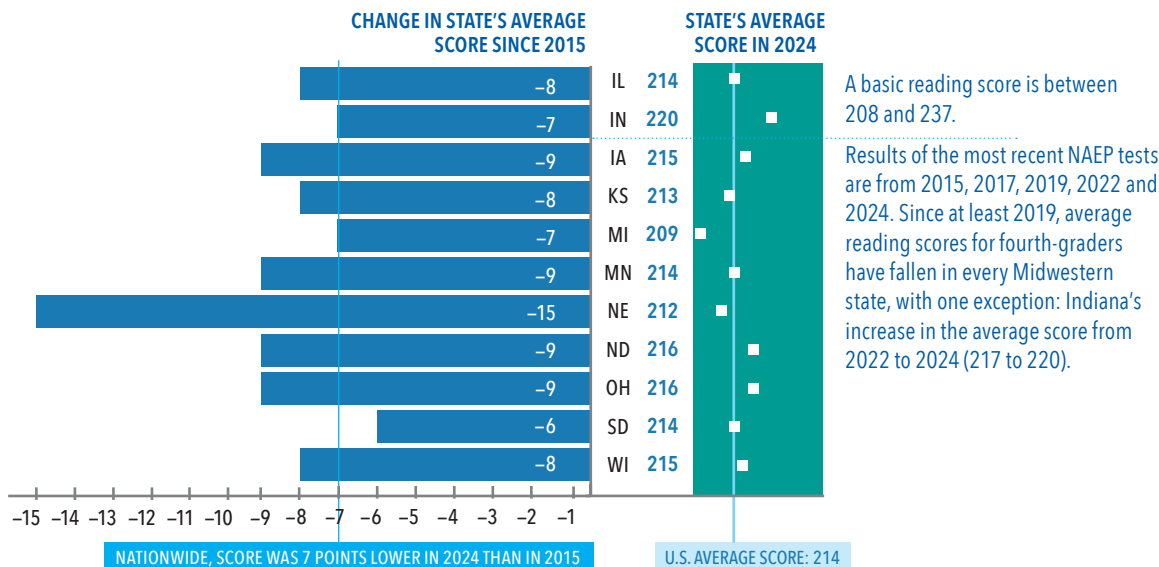
One common policy response (Indiana is one of many examples) has been to embrace the adoption of an instructional model colloquially known as the “science of reading.” This style – which has existed in some form or another for decades – is not the product of a single curriculum model. It does, however, typically place a strong emphasis on students learning to read words phonetically as opposed to them analyzing sentence context clues or syntax.

Through new laws and investments, states are taking a multifaceted approach to implement the science of reading or related literacy-education strategies in K-12 schools. Recent state actions have included:

- revising the learning standards established by state departments of education;
- making the mastery of evidence-based literacy instruction a prerequisite for securing certain types of teaching licenses (for example, elementary-school teachers, reading specialists and English teachers);
- requiring and investing in professional development training for new and veteran teachers on evidence-based instructional methods such as the science of reading;
- providing the funding for schools to hire literacy coaches who advise on and lead implementation of evidence-based instructional strategies;
- revamping how reading instruction is taught at teacher preparation programs to specifically align with the science of reading and, in some cases, prohibit instruction in other methods such as three-cueing;
- identifying “at-risk” or “struggling” students earlier in their academic careers via universal, state-mandated screening assessments; and
- providing these students with targeted, state-supported interventions such as high-dosage tutoring and summer learning opportunities.

This Issue Brief summarizes recent new state laws and investments in the Midwest to improve reading and literacy instruction. It also looks at progress (or the lack of it) in implementing these strategies, and the extent to which they are making a difference in student achievement.

Average Reading Scores of Fourth-Graders: 2024 results and change since 2015



Source: The National Assessment of Educational Progress, "The Nation's Report Card"

Implementation Challenges with Mixed Results in Student Performance

The legislative push to bring the science of reading to the classroom often has come with expedited timelines and short deadlines for schools.

Laws passed in 2023 in Indiana (**HB 1590**), Ohio (**HB 33**) and Wisconsin (**AB 321**) reflect this desire to see changes made in as prompt a manner as possible.

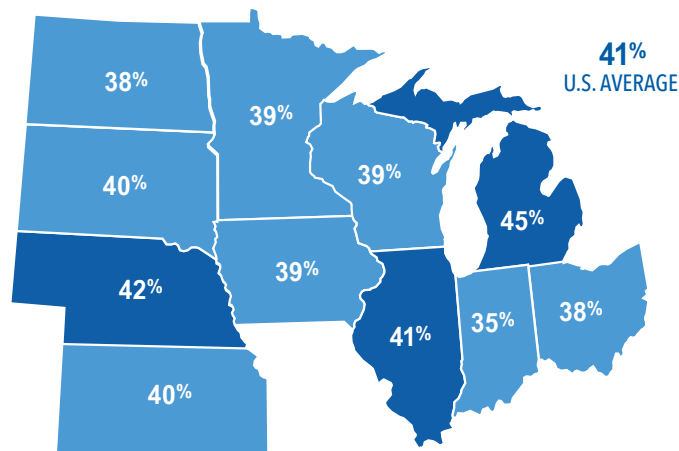
In these three states, the enacted measures called for the adoption of learning standards aligned with the science of reading in teacher preparation programs; for teacher licenses to require new literacy endorsements; and for current educators to complete professional development in science-of-reading teaching methods.

Legislators in all three states set timelines of one to two years for these reforms to be implemented.

Despite best intentions, full academic integration and noticeable improvements to reading scores often have proven to be a process that will take time.

In Ohio, for example, the 2023 law required all postsecondary institutions to fully adopt science-of-reading-only content in their teacher preparation programs by January 2025.

% of Fourth-Grade Students Scoring Below NAEP Basic Achievement Level for Reading*, 2024



*The NAEP basic level denotes partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for performance at the NAEP proficient level.

Source: The National Assessment of Educational Progress, "The Nation's Report Card"

An audit report published in December 2025 by the state Department of Higher Education, however, found that 10 institutions were still not in alignment. These institutions have until December 2026 to address noted deficiencies or risk having approval of their teacher education programs revoked by the state.

The desired improvements to student reading scores have also yet to materialize.

In academic year 2023, a little more than 62 percent of Ohio's third-graders were proficient in English language arts, according to the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce. Assessments conducted the following school year showed slight gains among not just third-graders, but also for students in grades four through six. By 2025, however, proficiency levels in third grade dropped to around 61 percent.

In an interview with *The 74*, a nonprofit news outlet covering education, a state agency official attributed the drop, in part, to an uneven adoption of science-of-reading policies among school districts.

“Last school year, we had districts [that] were in very different places in their implementation of science of reading,” Chris Woolard, chief integration officer of the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, said. “We had some of those early adopters that have been doing this for a few years. We had others who are (still in) early stages.”

In other states, substantial gains have occurred in recent years, but not always for obvious reasons.

In May 2026, the Harvard University Center for Education Policy Research and The Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University released a report based on their Education Scorecard metric.

One aspect analyzed in this report: the impact of integration of the science of reading on reading achievement growth in states.

The researchers specifically looked at how many elements of an 18-point policy plan on literacy education states had adopted, and whether there was a correlation between adoption of this plan and academic progress. (The nonprofit group ExcelinEd developed the 18-point plan.)

The plan’s elements include the use of literacy coaches, universal screenings to identify at-risk readers, requiring parental notification about a child’s identified reading deficiencies, and the development of individualized reading plans for students.

Seven states that adopted seven or more of these elements did experience small or significant growth in reading achievement between 2022 and 2025. That list of states includes two from the Midwest: Indiana and Minnesota.

At the same time, 17 states that had adopted seven or more elements of the policy plan experienced a drop in achievement levels, including Iowa, Michigan, Nebraska and Ohio in the Midwest.

“There is not a strong correlation between the magnitude of state reading improvement and the number of science of reading policy elements adopted,” the researchers found.

“However, we did note a striking pattern: none of the states which had implemented fewer than seven of the science of reading policy elements as of January 2024 (South Dakota, Hawaii, Rhode Island, New Jersey, New Hampshire, Georgia, Wisconsin, California, Washington and Massachusetts) saw achievement growth in reading.”

Education Week Analysis of Select Policies Implemented by States Since 2013 *(as of August 2026)*

ENACTED POLICIES AND LAWS	IL	IN	IA	KS	MI	MN	NE	ND	OH	SD	WI
Revamp teacher preparation through new instructional approaches, course offerings and evidence-based practices		◆			◆				◆		◆
Require student teachers and/or employed teachers to pass tests in reading instruction or earn a credential in order to obtain/renew a teaching license	◆	◆	◆								◆
Invest in instructional coaching on evidence-based reading instruction and/or require professional development for teachers	◆	◆		◆	◆	◆		◆	◆		◆
Establish requirements on type of assessments and/or materials used to measure students’ reading process/difficulties or mandate that schools undergo review process when selecting assessments/materials	◆	◆*		◆	◆	◆	◆**	◆	◆		◆
Establish use of specific instructional methods and/or frequency of intervention for struggling readers	◆			◆	◆	◆	◆		◆		◆

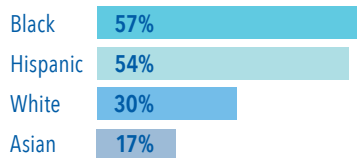
* Materials only ** Assessments only

Gaps in Reading Performance by State and Student Group

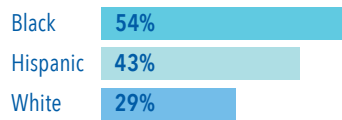
% of fourth-grade students scoring BELOW BASIC on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2024

BELOW BASIC by ETHNICITY AND RACE*

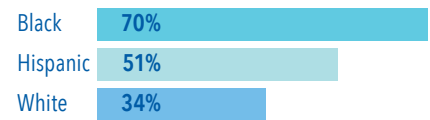
ILLINOIS



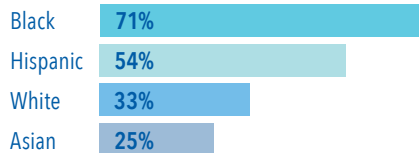
INDIANA



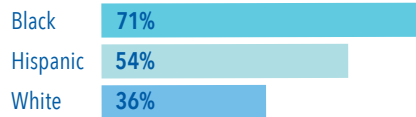
IOWA



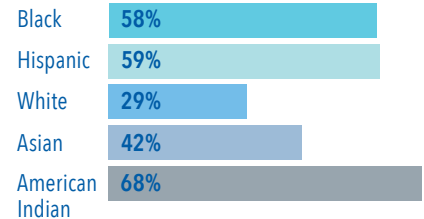
KANSAS



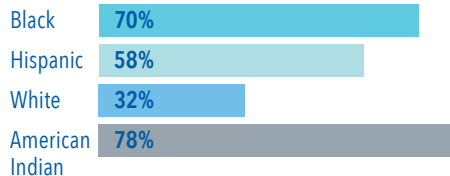
MICHIGAN



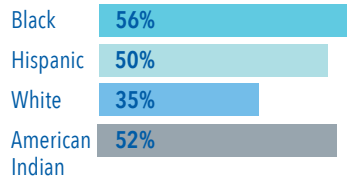
MINNESOTA



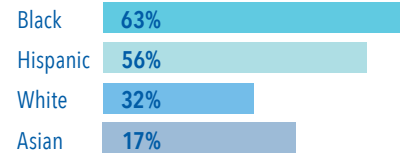
NEBRASKA



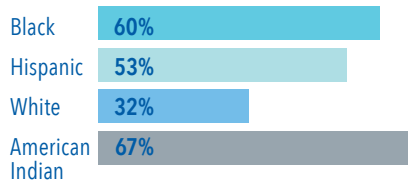
NORTH DAKOTA



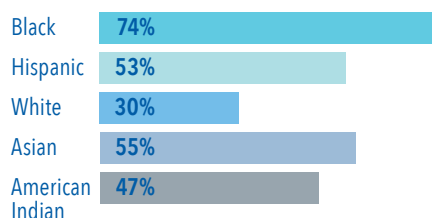
OHIO



SOUTH DAKOTA



WISCONSIN



* Results by race/ethnicity only are listed if reporting standards are met (based on sample sizes and minimum participation rates)

NOTABLE GAPS BY ETHNICITY AND RACE In five Midwestern states – Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Nebraska and Wisconsin – 70 percent or more of black fourth-grade students had below-basic scores. The percentage of below-basic scores also was particularly high among American Indian students in Nebraska (78%), Minnesota (68%) and South Dakota (67%).

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

A Closer Look at

Two States' Approaches: Illinois and Kansas



Illinois: A New Comprehensive Literacy Plan

Not every state in the Midwest that has made recent changes to literacy education curricula has done so under the specific guise of the science of reading.

In Illinois, for example, the state's new Comprehensive Literacy Plan prioritizes educational strategies and pedagogies that are evidence-based – meaning literacy and reading instruction shown to be successful in academic studies that used randomized control trials or other experimental methods.

Rather than promoting a specific educational method, the state plan calls for instruction based on seven core components – oracy, phonological awareness, word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension and writing.

In 2023, with the passage of **SB 2243**, Illinois legislators tasked the State Board of Education with developing this new roadmap for enhancing literacy instruction. The plan was released one year later.

It emphasizes lessons and instructional methods that are accessible to students of all backgrounds and levels of prior knowledge.

One way in which this can come into play is educators analyzing the content of word problems used in exams meant to assess reading comprehension. If certain reading prompts rely too heavily upon cultural references unfamiliar to students who are multilingual or bidialectal, an argument can be made that it unintentionally puts these students at a disadvantage and could result in artificially lower scores.

This commitment to equitable language arts education is further articulated in Illinois' Guiding Values for Literacy.

- Every learner is capable and has the right to equitable access to high-quality, inclusive, differentiated and evidence-based literacy instruction.
- Every learner deserves schools that nurture an individual's unique assets and interests, honoring a student's complexity within the context of the learner's communities.
- Every learner has the right to develop literacy in two or more languages to prepare for success in our global world.
- Every learner has the right to be empowered through agency to self-advocate within supportive learning environments.
- Every learner has the right to reliable and valid assessments that accurately measure the student's literacy skills.

The Illinois State Board of Education has made available on its website a number of resources for teachers and schools to implement elements of the statewide literacy plan, including local plan templates and a literacy coaching checklist.

In addition, the department hosted a Literacy Institute in June 2026 designed for attendees to "engage in collaborative learning, learn from educators across Illinois, and develop actionable plans [that they] can take back and implement immediately."



The Kansas Blueprint for Literacy

In 2024, Kansas lawmakers passed **SB 438**, which established a statewide framework known as the Kansas Blueprint for Literacy. In addition to appropriating initial funding of \$10 million, the blueprint set a series of deadlines for when content aligned with the science of reading should be fully implemented and when the state expects to see a vast majority of students mastering reading skills.

Unlike in some other states, however, these benchmarks were mostly set further in the future.

For example, although the law called for postsecondary institutions to begin offering course credits in science-of-reading-inspired coursework for teacher candidates specializing in elementary education less than a year after SB 438 was signed into law, the blueprint sets a goal that 100 percent of teacher candidates specializing in elementary education, English language learning or special education obtain a micro-credential in science-of-reading instruction by the year 2030.

As for student achievement, the blueprint's goal is for 90 percent of students in grades three through eight to, at a minimum, perform at a basic ability on the state's assessment of English language arts skills by 2033.

In 2025, close to 72 percent of Kansas students achieved basic or higher levels in English language arts. This is up from 67 percent for the 2023-24 school year.

SB 438 also created a Literacy Advisory Committee and tasked it with regularly monitoring progress.

This includes tracking completion rates of teacher in-service and pre-service trainings in the science of reading, as well as working with the Kansas Board of Regents to form six "regional centers of excellence in reading."

These regional centers bring postsecondary and K-12 schools together in order to co-design strategic literacy plans, support the training of literacy coaches, and pilot structured reading simulations. Through these simulations, teachers practice and apply evidence-based literacy instructional techniques in a controlled environment and receive guided coaching and feedback – before actual implementation in the classroom.

The state's progress reports are shared with members of the Legislature and also are available to the public online. According to the January 2026 report, more than 9,400 educators in Kansas had completed professional development training using LETRS (which is centered on instruction in the science of reading) or other state-approved programs. More than 18,000 educators are required to complete such training as part of a license renewal mandate that takes effect in 2028.

In 2026, lawmakers expanded on the initial Blueprint for Literacy with the passage of **HB 2485**.

In part, this new law mandates schools' use of a statewide universal student screening tool, which will be implemented by the start of the 2027-28 school year. This tool will allow schools to identify students at "high risk" of falling behind and lacking proficiency in foundational reading skills.

Under the state law, these schools must then develop an individual literacy plan in concert with the child's parent/guardian. These plans will include, at a minimum, 90 minutes of targeted instruction per week in the form of one-on-one tutoring, small-group instruction or summer school programming.

HB 2485 also requires all elementary school districts to employ – either directly or through a shared-services agreement with other schools – licensed reading specialists beginning in academic year 2030. These specialists must possess at least 45 hours of field experience in training related to evidence-based instruction and diagnostic data analysis.

Examples of Notable Recent State Laws on Literacy and Reading Instruction

ILLINOIS



SB 1672 (2025): Starting with the 2026-27 school year, each school district that serves students in kindergarten through third grade must report the reading assessments they used, and how frequently they are administered, to the Illinois State Board of Education.

HB 1368 (2025): As a part of license renewals, teachers must document any professional development trainings they have completed. Trainings related to literacy education must be aligned to evidence-based strategies as defined by the Illinois State Board of Education's Comprehensive Literacy Plan.

INDIANA



SB 1 (2024): Under this law, grants go to summer school programs that prioritize curriculum content related to literacy and the science of reading for struggling students in second and third grades. Summer school teachers must be versed in content aligned with the science of reading. Students with attendance rates of less than 90 percent in these summer programs must participate in an individualized reading plan the following school year. SB 1 requires universal screenings for students in kindergarten through second grade, as well as the development of remediation plans for struggling readers. SB 1 also requires the retention of some third-graders reading below grade level (see details on page 11).

HB 1243 (2024): This law expands an existing state grant for schools to develop a literacy coaching model program. Approved uses include mentoring existing in-school literacy coaches and reviewing professional portfolios and student performances. The law also further expounds on the duties of literacy coaches to include facilitating teacher study groups, educating teachers in data analysis and how to diagnose student reading deficiencies, and working with students in whole and small groups and via individual tutoring.

SB 199 (2026): Teachers working in schools where fewer than an average of 75 percent of students, over the course of three consecutive years, achieved passing reading scores must participate in professional development aligned with the science of reading. A previous law had set the threshold at 70 percent.

IOWA



HF 2618 (2024): The law authorizes the administration of an exam identical to the 2012 Foundations of Reading Assessment-Massachusetts (or latest version) for teacher preparation candidates. Institutions of higher education are mandated to annually report to the state the percentage of their students (those in pursuit of teaching licenses) whose scores on this assessment are above, at and below passing.

Under this same law, the parents/guardians of students in kindergarten through sixth grade who are not reading proficiently must be notified. Struggling students will be provided with individualized reading plans and can be retained in their current grade upon parental permission.

HF 2783 (2026): This law appropriates funds for the state to purchase a license for an early-warning screening assessment to be used for students in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade.

MICHIGAN



SB 567 (2024): Students in third grade can now be screened in English language arts three or more times a year. The law recommends a literacy coach model that emphasizes district-level professional development, differentiated instruction, progress monitoring, study groups, and training teachers in data analysis. Literacy coaches must have experience as teachers and working with adult learners, knowledge on the science of reading, and a bachelor's degree and advanced coursework in reading or literacy instruction. Students identified as struggling in reading must be provided with an individualized improvement plan within 30 days, with written notice sent to parents/guardians.

SB 568 (2024): Starting in fall 2027, instruction in the science of reading will be required in programs preparing prospective teachers for licenses in reading instruction, language arts and special education. The requirement applies to school psychologist licenses as well.

HB 5630 (2026): Included in this enacted state budget law was more than \$100 million to be used toward teacher professional development aligned to the science of reading as well as an expansion in the availability and use of literacy coaches in schools. HB 5630 also allocates new dollars for literacy curriculum, before- and after- school programs, and high-impact tutoring.



MINNESOTA

HF 2497 (2023): Known as the READ Act, this law established universal screenings of students while requiring school districts to implement evidence-based, structured literacy reading instruction practices. The districts must employ “literacy leads” to guide implementation of these practices. The law establishes a partnership between the state Department of Education and University of Minnesota to identify effective literacy curricula and interventions for use by school districts. Professional development programs for teachers must be provided, with completion of this training required by July 2027. Districts must submit a Local Literacy Plan to the state.

HF 4492 (2026): Students in kindergarten through third grade already were being screened for their reading comprehension skills three times a school year. This law further requires students in fourth grade and above to be screened once a year if they are not reading at grade level. The law also calls for school districts to annually report how their students are utilizing school library media centers to complement their literacy education; for the state Department of Education to review state literacy materials to ensure they are evidence-based and culturally representative; and for teacher preparation programs related to early literacy to incorporate in-classroom field experience.



NORTH DAKOTA

HB 1231 (2023): This law amended teacher licensure requirements for those specializing in early childhood and elementary grades – which already required phonemic awareness – to specifically require mastery of reading instruction that aligns with “scientifically based, evidence-based, and research-based curricula.” HB 1231 also altered universal dyslexia screenings of students aged 7 years and younger. Specifically, students must be assessed on “core components of phonemic awareness, decoding, and spelling.”

Under this same law, professional development on instruction related to phonemic awareness and related topics may meet the requirements needed for licensure renewal. HB 1231 also created a task force to review state statutes relating to literacy, dyslexia and related teacher training.



SOUTH DAKOTA

HB 1022 (2024): Lawmakers appropriated \$6 million to the state Department of Education to provide teacher professional development opportunities in strategies that align with the science of reading.



WISCONSIN

SB 971 (2024): This law created the Office of Literacy and the Literacy Coaching Program. Two annual reports published in the fall of 2025 revealed the following updates:

- \$9 million was available for the early-literacy coaching program.
- The Department of Public Instruction anticipated entering into contracts with 36 full-time early-literacy coaches to serve for two years.
- In terms of teacher professional development training in new literacy education strategies, nearly 59 percent of current teachers had completed such training, 40 percent were enrolled, and 1 percent had not yet started.
- During the 2024-25 school year, more than 97,000 students statewide (nearly 37 percent of total enrollment) were found to be scoring below the 25th percentile on fundamental skills or universal screening assessments. This means the students are deemed “at risk.” Students who are identified as at-risk on a universal screening assessment or diagnostic assessment must receive a personal reading plan.
- More than 86,000 students began receiving reading interventions through personalized reading plans, with 12,000 eventually exiting their respective programs.

Gaps in Reading Performance by State and Student Group

% of fourth-grade students scoring BELOW BASIC on the National Assessment of Education Progress, 2024

BELOW BASIC by INCOME STATUS

ILLINOIS



INDIANA



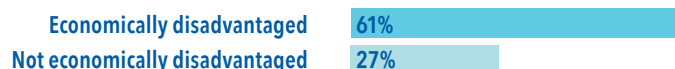
IOWA



KANSAS



MICHIGAN



MINNESOTA



NEBRASKA



NORTH DAKOTA



OHIO



SOUTH DAKOTA



WISCONSIN



INCOME GAP IN STUDENT SCORES In every Midwestern state, a much higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students had below-basic scores compared to their non-economically disadvantaged peers. The largest gap was in Michigan: 61% vs. 27%. The smallest gap was in North Dakota: 49% vs. 33%.

BELOW BASIC by GENDER

ILLINOIS



INDIANA



IOWA



KANSAS



MICHIGAN



MINNESOTA



NEBRASKA



NORTH DAKOTA



OHIO



SOUTH DAKOTA



WISCONSIN



GENDER GAP IN STUDENT SCORES In every Midwestern state, male fourth-graders were more likely to score below basic than female fourth-graders. The gap ranged from two percentage points in Kansas to 10 percentage points in Wisconsin.



Should Third-Graders Struggling with Reading Be Held Back?

One much-debated tool that lawmakers sometimes choose to use is requiring students who have repeatedly failed literacy assessments to repeat a grade, particularly matriculation from third to fourth grade.

Most Midwestern states have no such mandate.

However, Indiana has begun implementation of a new third-grade retention reading law (**SB 1** of 2024). The measure requires retention of a student who does not pass the state's IREAD assessment of foundational reading skills. Prior to retention, students receive instructional interventions and get multiple attempts to pass the assessment. Several "good cause" exemptions also are included in SB 1 (for example, for students who have disabilities, are English language learners, or had a high score on a standardized math test).

In 2025, 3.6 percent of Indiana third-graders were retained; another 8 percent were promoted under the good-cause exemption. According to the state Department of Education, both of these student populations continue to receive targeted reading supports.

A longstanding Ohio law requires schools to retain students who score below the promotion score on a state test. But there are exemptions to the state mandate, including if a parent/guardian requests that the student be promoted to fourth grade.

A measure included in Iowa's **HF 2618** (2024) allows parents/guardians to submit a request to the school district that their child be retained in the third grade. In Nebraska, lawmakers in 2026 debated a retention bill (**LB 1050**) for students still struggling to read by the end of third grade. The legislation, however, came up short by two votes after being filibustered for several hours.

In Wisconsin, a provision in a 2023 law (**AB 321**) requires public and private school boards to develop a written policy outlining the criteria for how a student can be promoted to the fourth grade. For struggling readers, the local policy must include services and supports. Starting in September 2027, third-grade students who continually struggle in reading comprehension cannot be promoted if it would mean violating criteria set by the local school board.

What the research says

Research on the benefits of early-grade retention has been mixed.

A 2022 study conducted by researchers from the University of New Hampshire and the University of Missouri explored the effects in the state of Indiana. (Even prior to enactment of the 2024 law, some Indiana third-graders were held back under a previous retention policy.)

In reviewing student data from academic years 2012 through 2017, the researchers found that retention policies did have “large positive short- and medium-term effects on same-grade achievement in math and English language arts.” The study also found that such policies do not have a causal impact on increased student discipline problems or absenteeism.

It is important to note, however, that the number of students actually retained was very low. Over the study’s five-year observation, less than 2 percent of third-graders were ordered to repeat the grade.

“Not surprisingly, retained students have lower average achievement, are disciplined at a higher rate, and are absent more frequently than their promoted peers in the year prior to the retention event,” the study notes.

“In addition, students enrolled for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL), Individualized Education Program (IEP) students, and Black and Hispanic students are overrepresented among retained students.”

A 2025 study in the *Journal of Public Economics* explored whether the benefits of retention policies are being overinflated when considering the fact that such a small percentage of students end up repeating grades.

Over the course of academic years 2021 and 2022, the researchers reviewed student data in Michigan – a state that at the time had a retention policy based on low reading scores.

The researchers concluded that having this policy did have a positive effect on student scores by a standard deviation of 0.05. But in most cases, improvement did not come about through a student actually repeating a grade. Although the likelihood of a student being retained increased by 3.4 percentage points upon being flagged, a majority of flagged students were simply supplied with extra levels of instructional support and, afterward, given opportunities to repeat examinations in order to avoid retention.

“From a policy perspective, our findings raise questions about the utility of test-based grade retention, which is part of state literacy law for more than a third of all public-school third-graders in the U.S.,” the study notes.

“Retention is not only unpopular among students, parents, and educators, it is also costly and introduces practical challenges for schools trying to balance class sizes and teaching loads between grades.”

In 2023, Michigan lawmakers successfully voted to remove mandated retention based solely on low reading scores (**SB 12**). During the 2026 legislative session, a bill (**HB 5520**) seeking to restore the policy successfully passed the House.



Authors of a different study from 2026 (done by researchers at American University and Syracuse University) reviewed student data in Ohio. Their conclusion: The seeming success of retention is not that the fear of repeating a grade is a good motivator. Rather, the retention mandate is part of a broader policy that helps identify at-risk students who may then benefit from concentrated, supplemental instruction and different teaching styles.



Change Takes Time and Commitment

If there is one common thread that connects the Midwest states and their approaches to literacy education intervention, it may be that lawmakers recognize long-term change will not come about through the implementation of a single policy fix.

Instead, they are embracing a package of reforms that will alter both K-12 and postsecondary instruction and methods.

It also may take some time to see positive results from the changes and new state investments.

Even in Mississippi – the state whose dramatic progress in early-learning reading scores inspired policymakers across the country – efforts to address struggling readers continue. For example, although average NAEP reading scores for fourth-graders in that state improved by 10 points between 2013 and 2024, the latest average scores among eighth-graders are back to 2013 levels.

For some states, a decision has been made to fully embrace methods aligned specifically to the science of reading. In others, a wider selection of options is still available to teachers.

In any case, policymakers and legislators alike recognize that literacy education policy is not static and must be regularly reviewed and finessed; that providing extra instructional supports to struggling students can be transformative; and that the success of reading interventions and programming is heavily reliant upon consistent access to funding from the state and other partners.



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