



ISSUE BRIEF | Center for Education Opportunity

# EARLY LITERACY IN THE STATE OF ARKANSAS

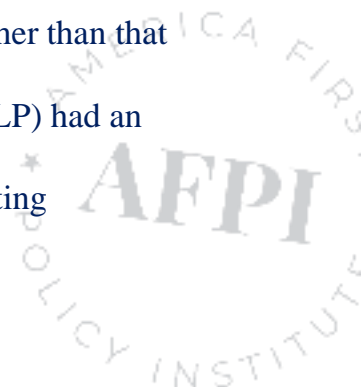
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## TOPLINE POINTS

- The children of Arkansas have fallen behind the rest of the Nation in reading and math and college readiness.
- Reading abilities, especially early literacy, are critical predictors of a person's lifelong success.
- Students who fail to learn to read proficiently by fourth grade are four times less likely to graduate than their grade level peers.

## ARKANSAS DATA

- According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), in 2019, the average reading score of fourth-grade students in Arkansas was 215. This was lower than the nationwide average score of 219, which is out of a total of 500.
- The percentage of fourth-grade students in Arkansas who performed at or above the NAEP proficient in reading level was only 31% in 2019.
- In 2019, Black fourth-grade students had an average reading score 26 points lower than White students.
- In 2019, Hispanic students had an average reading score 12 points lower than White students.
- In 2019, female students in Arkansas had an average reading score higher than that of male students by 5 points.
- In 2019, students eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) had an average score of 25 points lower than those not eligible.
- In 2019, 100% of high school students took the American College Testing (ACT) and scored an average of 19.3%.



- Black Students who took the ACT had an average composite score of 16.
- White students who took the ACT had an average composite score of 20.6.
- Hispanic students who took the ACT had an average composite score of 17.9.
- In 2019, only 16% of Arkansas graduates met all four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks.
- In 2017, Arkansas established the [Reading Initiative for Student Excellence](#) to provide reading instruction based on reading science, emphasizing phonics. The program is designed to create a culture of reading in the schools, with individualized help to ensure third-grade students read at grade level.
- Arkansas also passed The Right to Read Act, which requires all licensed elementary and special education teachers in Arkansas to *demonstrate proficiency* in “The Science of Reading” by the beginning of the 2021–2022 school year.
- Also, [a law](#) passed in 2010 includes public school progression and assessments to help measure student progress.

## KEY MESSAGING / TALKING POINTS

1. A person’s reading ability is a critical predictor of educational and lifelong success.
  - a. Dropping out of school and incarceration are all more likely outcomes of a poor reader.<sup>1</sup>
2. A strong reading program begins in kindergarten and continues into the third grade and beyond.
  - a. Successful reading programs begin with phonics in kindergarten and build on reading comprehension and critical thinking by third grade.
3. A student who still needs time to master reading must have every opportunity to strengthen and gain this skill before entering fourth grade to better ensure a successful future.
  - a. A student who misses the opportunity to learn to read proficiently before fourth grade rarely catches up.<sup>2</sup>
  - b. Conversely, students who enter fourth grade capable of reading and can use their reading skills to learn are positioned with a much higher probability for high school graduation and readiness for college or a good job.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://governorsfoundation.org/gelf-articles/early-literacy-connection-to-incarceration/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ccf.ny.gov/files/9013/8262/2751/AECFReporReadingGrade3.pdf>



4. Beginning in fourth grade and beyond, a student must be prepared to read to learn across all subject areas.
  - a. Reading to learn enables a student to comprehend facts in social studies and science, understand word problems in math and interpret increasingly complex concepts in language arts.
  - b. To ensure fourth grade readiness, students may need to repeat third grade (or an earlier grade) and be provided with personalized learning plans and intensive support to enter fourth grade ready to learn successfully.
5. States can support this approach by reprioritizing existing funds and investing new money to implement reading-to-learn policies. Over time, this saves taxpayer dollars on remedial instruction and dropout prevention in the later grades
  - a. Comprehensive implementation strategies for K–3 reading policies work best, whereas piecemeal approaches typically fail to produce desired outcomes.
  - b. Early identification of students’ reading skills—through assessments, strong reading programs, and additional supports for struggling readers— together form a self-supporting system that leads to proven student success.
6. As of July 28, 2022, 30 states had passed laws or implemented new policies related to evidence-based reading instruction since 2013.<sup>3</sup>
7. Arkansas students are still behind. Research supports retention policies and provides evidence that it helps students improve their reading.
  - a. 85% of all juveniles who interface with the juvenile court system are functionally low literate.<sup>4</sup>
  - b. Juvenile incarceration reduces the probability of high school completion and increases the likelihood of incarceration later in life.<sup>5</sup>
  - c. High school dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested in their lifetime.<sup>6</sup>
  - d. High school dropouts are 63% more likely to be incarcerated than their peers with four-year college degrees.<sup>7</sup>

## COMPREHENSIVE K-3 READING POLICY FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/which-states-have-passed-science-of-reading-laws-whats-in-them/2022/07>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.begintoread.com/research/literacystatistics.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nber.org/papers/w19102>

<sup>6</sup> <https://all4ed.org/publication/LiteracyWithinESEA/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.begintoread.com/research/literacystatistics.html>



A Comprehensive Early Literacy Policy establishes support and intensive reading interventions for all K–3 students to ensure they read on grade level by the end of third grade. The policy also should require third-grade students to demonstrate sufficient reading skills for promotion to fourth grade. For students severely below grade level and who do not qualify for a good cause exemption, retention provides struggling readers the additional time and intensive interventions they need to catch up with their peers. (*See attached sample legislation.*)

A Comprehensive Early Literacy Policy must include the following:

- Statewide science of reading training beginning with K–4 teachers and elementary school administrators.
- Ongoing, job-embedded science of reading training and support for teachers via literacy coaches.
- Ensuring Teacher Prep Programs are preparing teacher candidates to have the knowledge and skills to teach all kids to read based on the science of reading.
- Funding and reprioritization of existing local, state, and federal funds for early literacy.
- Early literacy screening administered three times per year and progress monitoring for K–3 students; screening for dyslexia characteristics administered at the end of kindergarten and the beginning of first grade for students identified as having a reading deficiency based on the universal screener.
- Parent notification when reading deficiency is identified and continued parent engagement with each progress report.
- District adoption of high-quality instructional materials grounded in scientifically based reading research and aligned to state standards.
- Individual reading plans for K–3 students identified with a reading deficiency and fourth-grade students promoted for good cause.
- Regularly monitor student progress and adjust instruction using proven strategies for closing opportunity gaps according to student need.
- Evidence-based interventions for struggling students and supports for special populations (i.e., ELs, special education, students with dyslexia, etc.) during school and before/after school.
- Summer reading camps or approved innovative summer reading programs provided to all K–3 students struggling in reading or potentially facing retention



- Parent read-at-home plan for students identified with a reading deficiency and a list of vetted online resource hubs for all parents to support literacy at home.
- Retention with increased intensive intervention in addition to a highly effective teacher and other supports for third-grade students severely below grade level who do not meet promotion requirements.
- Multiple opportunities to ensure one test on one day is NOT the sole determining factor for promotion to fourth grade (state test, alternative test, portfolio).
- Good cause exemptions for students meeting established criteria.

## MYTHS VS. FACTS ABOUT IMPROVING LITERACY THROUGH THE USE OF TEST SCORES

**Myth:** Failure to read is only an education problem.

**Fact:** Failure to read is both an education and an economic problem. Seven out of every 10 prison inmates cannot read above a fourth-grade level, and 85% of teenagers in the juvenile system have difficulty reading. Nearly 90% of students who drop out of high school are struggling readers in third grade. And high school dropouts make up 90% of Americans on welfare and 75% of citizens receiving food stamps. Failure to read limits economic opportunities for individuals and increases demand for taxpayer resources later in life.

**Myth:** Students can learn to read after third grade without challenge.

**Fact:** Students rarely catch up if they have not mastered reading by third grade. Students must learn to read in K–3 to read to learn in fourth grade and beyond. Reading to learn means comprehending facts in social studies and science, understanding word problems in math, and interpreting complex materials in language arts.

**Myth:** The decision to promote a student to the fourth grade is based on one test score.

**Fact:** Promotion decisions are based on a comprehensive assessment of the student's mastery of third-grade reading skills. Students have three different opportunities to demonstrate sufficient reading skills for promotion to fourth grade: 1. Pass the state test at a minimum level. 2. Pass alternative assessment. 3. Demonstrate sufficient reading skills in a portfolio of independently produced student work.

**Myth:** Students and parents may be surprised at the end of the third-grade year to find that the student is not ready to be promoted.

**Fact:** Retention is the last resort. The fully implemented K–3 Reading program identifies students struggling to read as early as kindergarten, with frequent literacy screenings and



parent notification/updates on progress over multiple school years. Students are given individual reading plans, home reading strategies, and reading interventions before/during/after school, and progress is monitored and shared at frequent intervals. Only those students who still demonstrate a need for the additional time to learn to read are retained in third grade.

**Myth:** The ability to read by third grade does not correlate with the ability to graduate from high school.

**Fact:** The ability to read by third grade is imperative for a student's ability to graduate from high school. This includes the years of high school and beyond, to career and/or college. Students who are not reading proficiently in third grade are four times more likely not to graduate high school. Low-income minority students are eight times more likely to drop out of high school. In fact, 88% of students who failed to earn a high school diploma were struggling readers in third grade.

**Myth:** Retention means simple repetition of the third grade.

**Fact:** Students who repeat third grade are supported with a comprehensive, intensive intervention program. A fully implemented K–3 Reading program is designed to give students every opportunity to be successful. Early literacy screenings and student progress updates are used to determine the student's learning needs. Students are placed with highly effective teachers and in classrooms that optimize learning. The repeated grade is designed to bring students who are significantly below grade level up to the required level of proficiency to be successful in fourth grade and beyond.

**Myth:** The K–3 Reading policy is rigid and allows no exemptions.

**Fact:** Some students are exempted from retention. Students with disabilities who have previously been retained, those with disabilities who do not take the same assessment, and those with less than two years of English instruction are exempt from retention. Retention also does not apply to students previously retained twice. However, all of these students continue to receive reading intervention services until their reading deficiency is remedied.

**Myth:** Interventions are focused only on the struggling student.

**Fact:** Interventions require the work of both the student and his or her parents or guardians. Students receiving interventions typically participate in summer reading camps, spend more time reading instruction, and monitor their learning more frequently. Parents or guardians also must help by implementing a read-at-home plan and/or attending parent workshops to learn how to help their child learn to read. Parents or guardians also provide input for the individual reading plans.

