



Early Grades: Reading

Annotated Bibliography

One of the most crucial missions of the early grades is teaching students to read. Third-grade reading proficiency predicts long-term outcomes, including high school graduation. Many state policymakers have set third grade as the key pivot point in the early grades and have enacted grade-level retention laws based on reading assessment results. Even so, about two-thirds of fourth-graders were not reading proficiently on a widely recognized national assessment in 2015. Evidence — such as work in Florida and Maryland — sheds light on reading policies that work. It indicates that retention policies should be paired with high-quality interventions and services for struggling readers. Also, researchers found the path to literacy starts years before third grade. Development in the first years of life shapes a child's ability to learn to read. Recent research and state evaluations provide policymakers with powerful tools as they create a holistic approach to statewide reading achievement.

The following studies highlight recent research on policy topics with nationwide applicability.

Third-grade reading proficiency is foundational to life-long learning.

1. **Fiester, L. (2013). *Early Warning Confirmed: A Research Update on Third-Grade Reading*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.**

This report summarizes key research and data on the importance of early reading. The author found that reading proficiency by the end of third grade is vital to the long-term success of students. For example, reading difficulties lower an individual's educational attainment and lifelong earnings. The author also argued that multiple societal factors influence third-grade reading proficiency. Chief among these factors is household income. Children who grow up in low-income households and neighborhoods have a lower chance of reading proficiently in third grade than their peers from more affluent households. The report illustrates pervasive achievement gaps that begin early and persist for many at-risk children. Other factors that contribute to early reading deficiencies are family stressors, such as food and housing insecurity, school readiness, chronic absenteeism, summer learning loss and low-quality teaching. As a policy solution, the report stresses the significance of early intervention and support for at-risk, struggling readers.

2. **Hernandez, D.J. (2011). *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.**

In this landmark, longitudinal study, a researcher followed nearly 4,000 students from third grade through high school to determine the impact of early reading success on long-term academic outcomes. He concluded that children who cannot read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely not to finish high school on time than those who can read proficiently. Data also showed that this risk is higher for struggling readers who live in poverty. In fact, the study reports that poverty negatively affects high school completion even for strong readers. Proficient readers who had experienced poverty graduate high school at equivalent rates to their more affluent peers who struggled with reading in third grade. The study closes with two-fold policy solutions that target the school quality and support at-risk families.

Beyond the ABCs: Numerous factors contribute to literacy in the early grades.

3. **Balfanz, R. & Byrnes, V. (2012). *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, Center for Social Organization of Schools.**

For this report, researchers analyzed data from six states to determine the causes and academic effects of school absenteeism. Research shows that chronic absenteeism — defined as missing at least 10 percent of the school year — leads to academic achievement and graduation rate gaps into postsecondary. This report

indicates that up to 15 percent of K-12 students in the nation are chronically absent each year. Chronic absenteeism rates are higher for low-income students and for students at the beginning and end of their schooling. Also, it tends to be localized rather than statewide, significantly impacting a small pool of high-risk schools. The researchers also found discrepancies in how school districts collect, label and report students' absences — a practice that can mask attendance patterns in individual schools. To combat absenteeism, they concluded that states should implement early warning systems that monitor attendance and intervene in individual student's absences. The study also reports that states need partnerships and incentive-based programs in schools and community agencies that are geared toward getting students to school each day.

4. **McCombs, J.S., Augustine, C.H., Schwartz, H.L., Bodilly, S.J., McInnis, B., Lichter, D.S., & Cross, A.B. (2011). *Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning*. Retrieved from www.rand.org**

This literature review synthesizes the research on the learning loss that accrues over the summer when some of a student's achievement gains from the previous school year atrophy. On average, students lose a month of learning over the summer. Evidence suggests, however, that students from low-income families are disproportionately affected by this loss. These students regress substantially in reading over the summer, while their peers from higher income households often make gains. In addition to research, the authors evaluated summer learning programs to identify their benefits and challenges. They found that these programs benefit students for at least two years. Even so, many school districts have cut summer programs due to budget constraints. The authors developed a list of policy recommendations from research and evaluation results to make summer learning programs more effective. The recommendations call for states to: prioritize high-quality staff with ample planning time; foster partnerships between school districts, private providers, nonprofits and local funders; and provide and leverage funding to these partnerships.

5. **Duncan, G.J., Dowsett, C.J., Claessens, A., et al. (2007). *School Readiness and Later Achievement*. *Developmental Psychology* (43. 6), 1428-1446.**

These researchers conducted a meta-analysis — a study of studies — of six large-scale, longitudinal studies, tracking the achievement and behavioral results of nearly 36,000 children. The goal of this work was to isolate the school entry skills that lead to higher reading and math scores and teacher ratings years later. The researchers found that early math skills most predict higher achievement results, in both reading and math, later in school. Language and early reading skills rank as a close second. Soft skills, specifically attention-related behaviors, also predict later achievement. However, aggression and social skills at school entry are not associated with later reading and math scores. The results of this meta-analysis stress the pivotal role of high-quality, early learning experiences to long-term academic success.

Raising reading achievement rests on coordinated and aligned policies.

6. **Valentino, R. & Reardon, S. (2015). *Effectiveness of Four Instructional Programs Designed to Serve English Language Learners: Variation by Ethnicity and Initial English Proficiency*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (37. 4), 612-637.**

Through an evaluation of four instructional programs, researchers set out to determine the most effective learning approach for English language learners (ELLs). They tracked reading and math test scores from kindergarten entry through seventh grade for students enrolled in ELL programs. Results were analyzed based on the ELL program type: English immersion, transitional bilingual, developmental bilingual, and dual immersion. Overall, the three two-language programs were associated with higher score gains than English immersion instruction — even though English immersion produced the strongest results through second grade. Long term, the score gains made by dual-immersion participants significantly outpaced those made by students in the other three programs. The researchers also found variation in outcomes based on student ethnicity, noting better academic outcomes from English immersion programs for Chinese participants than for Latino participants. Latino participants gained more when enrolled in two-language programs. The results remind policymakers that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for increasing English proficiency and reading achievement for English language learners; Policy solutions should be tailored based on local needs.

7. Lesaux, N. (2013). *PreK-3rd: Getting Literacy Instruction Right*. New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development.

This policy brief provides guidance to policymakers and practitioners who aim to strengthen early literacy instruction. First, the author analyzed research to show that literacy is a gradual process that is built over time through the mastery of many stackable skills. The brief lists effective instructional practices for early childhood educators to raise students' literacy skills mastery. Second, the author argued that mastery depends on a coordinated and aligned approach to literacy from preschool to third grade (P-3). The brief closes with policy recommendations to build an effective state P-3 literacy plan: strengthen public pre-K programs; align P-3 standards, instruction and assessments; create specialized early learning teacher certification and preparation programs; and develop community-wide partnerships to promote literacy.

8. National Governors Association. (2013). *A Governor's Guide to Early Literacy: Getting All Students Reading by Third Grade*. Retrieved from www.nga.org

By juxtaposing research with state practice, this report highlights effective early literacy policies that ensures more children are reading proficiently by third grade. An analysis reveals gaps between state policy and evidence-based best practices. For example, formal schooling begins with kindergarten, but language development starts at birth. The remainder of the report provides five actionable steps that policymakers can take to improve statewide reading proficiency. The five steps are: align comprehensive literacy standards and curriculum from P-3; increase access to high-quality preschool and full-day kindergarten; cultivate parent engagement in language and literacy development; ensure P-3 teachers complete specialized training in reading instruction; and develop aligned accountability and improvement systems with a strong emphasis on literacy. Throughout, the report offers rich state examples of successful policy implementation.

9. Walsh, K., Glaser, D., & Wilcox, D.D. (2006). *What Education Schools Aren't Teaching About Reading and What Elementary Teachers Aren't Learning*. National Council on Teacher Quality. Retrieved from www.nctq.org

In this study, researchers reviewed the syllabi and text books used to teach reading instruction in 72 education schools across the nation. The goal of the review was to determine how well the content of these instructional tools aligned with the multi-dimensional science of reading, as championed by the landmark 2000 National Reading Panel report. The researchers found that most teacher preparation programs did not properly prepare future educators to effectively teach reading. Only 15 percent of the reviewed programs exposed students to all five of the scientific domains of reading instruction. Of the 227 reviewed text books, only four were deemed acceptable in terms of comprehensive coverage of the essential reading domains. These findings highlight the need for states to incentivize higher standards for education schools and to include evidence-based reading assessments in their teacher certification processes.

An ounce of prevention: Early identification and intervention policies are key.

10. Squires, J. (2015). *Retention in the Early Years: Is Early Retention an Effective, Research-Based Strategy for Improving Student Outcomes*. Retrieved from www.ceelo.org

This policy brief synthesizes results from studies, meta-analyses and literature reviews dating back to the 1980s to determine how grade-level retention affects students. Decades of research show that test-based and teacher-based retention lead to short-term academic gains. Long term, most gains fade out. Retained students are more likely to drop out of school. Results are mixed on the social and emotional effects of retention. The research did indicate that black and Latino students, students from low-income families and students with disabilities are more likely to be retained. The author concluded that retention laws need to be paired with strong early identification and intervention strategies, as well as evidence-based remediation, for retention to be effective. Having an isolated policy that requires students to repeat the same grade and content does not lead to achievement gains. The brief stresses the important role of intensive, individualized and small group instruction, such as one-on-one coaching, in helping struggling readers to catch up.

11. Slavin, R.E., Lake, C., Davis, S., & Madden, N.A. (2011). Effective Programs for Struggling Readers: A Best-Evidence Synthesis. *Educational Research Review* (6), 1-26.

This research review addresses different intervention techniques for struggling readers in kindergarten through fifth grade. The researchers compared the results of 97 studies to determine the effectiveness of four programs — one-on-one tutoring, small group tutoring, targeted classroom instruction and computer-assisted instruction — in improving student achievement in reading. Overall, they concluded that one-on-one tutoring approaches are the most effective means to improve reading performance. In particular, tutoring with an emphasis on phonics resulted in stronger results than other programs. Tutoring led by a teacher was more effective than tutoring that uses volunteers or paraprofessionals. Computer-assisted instruction in the early grades was not associated with improved reading performance.

Evaluations of early grades reading initiatives in SREB states

Florida

Winters, M.A. & Greene, J.P. (2012). The Medium-run Effects of Florida's Test-based Promotion Policy. *Education Finance and Policy* (7.3), 305-330.

For this study, researchers calculated the academic effects of remediation under Florida's third-grade, test-based reading retention law. Since 2003, retained third-graders have received intensive remediation during the repeated year, such as required summer school and assignment to a different teacher. This study shows that retained students' reading, math and science test scores jump substantially in the coming years. These students perform better on achievement tests through the seventh grade than comparable students who were socially promoted in third grade. The researchers noted that this positive effect fades over time though, attributing the initial benefits to Florida's system of intervention and support for retained students.

Folsom, J., Petscher, Y., Osborne-Lampkin, L., Cooley, S., Herrera, S., Partridge, M., & Smith, K. (2016). *School Reading Performance and the Extended School Day Policy in Florida*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

The authors of this study assessed the academic impact of Florida's extended school day policy on student achievement. Since 2012, the state has required the 100 (now 300) K-5 schools that performed the lowest on the state reading assessment to provide an additional hour of reading instruction as part of the school day. This study finds that reading performance improved for these schools; however, the improvement was similar to the expected year-to-year variation. Considerations for policymakers include the quality of the supplemental instruction and the criteria used to determine the lowest performing elementary schools.

Maryland

Connolly, F. & Olson, L. (2012). *Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools' Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten*. Retrieved from www.baltimore-berc.org

In this study of chronic absenteeism in Baltimore pre-K and kindergarten programs, researchers found that students who miss school regularly in the first few school years tend to have low attendance throughout school. Chronically absent pre-K and kindergarten students perform lower on achievement tests than their peers, and they also are more likely to be retained by third grade. Interestingly though, improvement in attendance later in school reduces the negative effect of early chronic absenteeism.

Various states, including Alabama, Arkansas and South Carolina

National Reading Technical Assistance Center. (2010). *A Study of the Effectiveness of K-3 Literacy Coaches*. Retrieved from www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst

This study looks at the implementation of Reading First — a federal K-3 literacy coach program focused on ongoing, job-embedded professional development — in 15 states. Through reviews of Reading First program evaluations and interviews with K-3 literacy coaches, the study provides rich insight into effective statewide coaching practices. Overall, it shows that Reading First significantly raised student achievement.

*Prepared September 2016 by Jenny Hite, policy analyst and publication coordinator
Contact Joan Lord (joan.lord@sreb.org) or Jenny Hite (jenny.hite@sreb.org) for additional information.*