

SREB

# Ready to Read Ready to Succeed

*State Policies That Support Fourth Grade Reading Success*

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Southern  
Regional  
Education  
Board

SREB.org



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*This report, originally published in November 2017, has been updated with 2017 NAEP data and information about state dyslexia policies that passed during states' 2018 legislative sessions. Tables 1 and 2 have also been revised.*

*This report was prepared by Samantha Durrance, policy analyst, under the direction of Jeff Gagne, director of Policy Analysis, and Joan Lord, vice president of Education Data, Policy Research and Programs.*

## Introduction

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### **Third grade is a critical checkpoint in a child’s educational journey.**

By the end of third grade, children need literacy skills that prepare them for increasing curriculum demands in fourth grade and beyond. Students who are not reading on grade level by this point are significantly more likely to drop out of high school or fail to graduate on time. They are also less likely to be successful in postsecondary education. For these reasons, states should do everything possible to ensure that students can read proficiently before moving on from third grade.

“The more you **read**  
the more **things** you know.  
The more that you **learn**  
the more **places** you’ll go.”  
-Dr. Seuss

In its 2016 *Challenge to Lead* goals for student achievement — an update to the goals originally created in 2002 by SREB states — SREB called for 90 percent of fourth graders to score at or above the Basic level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading by the year 2020. It also called for the percentage of fourth graders who score at or above the Proficient level on NAEP in reading to increase regularly and reach a level above the national average.

Known as the Nation’s Report Card, NAEP is a key measure of academic achievement. Fourth grade NAEP reading scores indicate the degree to which states are successfully developing students’ reading skills in the early grades. A 4 percentage-point increase between 2007 and 2017 in the proportion of fourth graders scoring at or above the Proficient level in reading on NAEP shows that SREB states have made some progress in raising reading achievement for young students.

Even so, the region still has a long way to go to ensure that all children are proficient readers before they get to fourth grade. In 2017, just 33 percent of fourth graders in SREB states performed at or above the Proficient level on NAEP in reading. Even smaller percentages of black and Hispanic students and students from low-income families reached this critical performance level. These percentages indicate that too few children are demonstrating solid grade-level reading skills.

An even greater percentage of students are entering fourth grade with significant reading deficiencies than are reading with proficiency. In 2017, the percentage of fourth graders in SREB states who did not meet the Basic achievement level on NAEP in reading ranged from 25 to as high as 44 percent (*see Appendix 1*). Research is clear that students who fall below the NAEP Basic level — and therefore do not meet grade-level standards — are unlikely to be successful in subsequent grades.

### NAEP Achievement Level Definitions

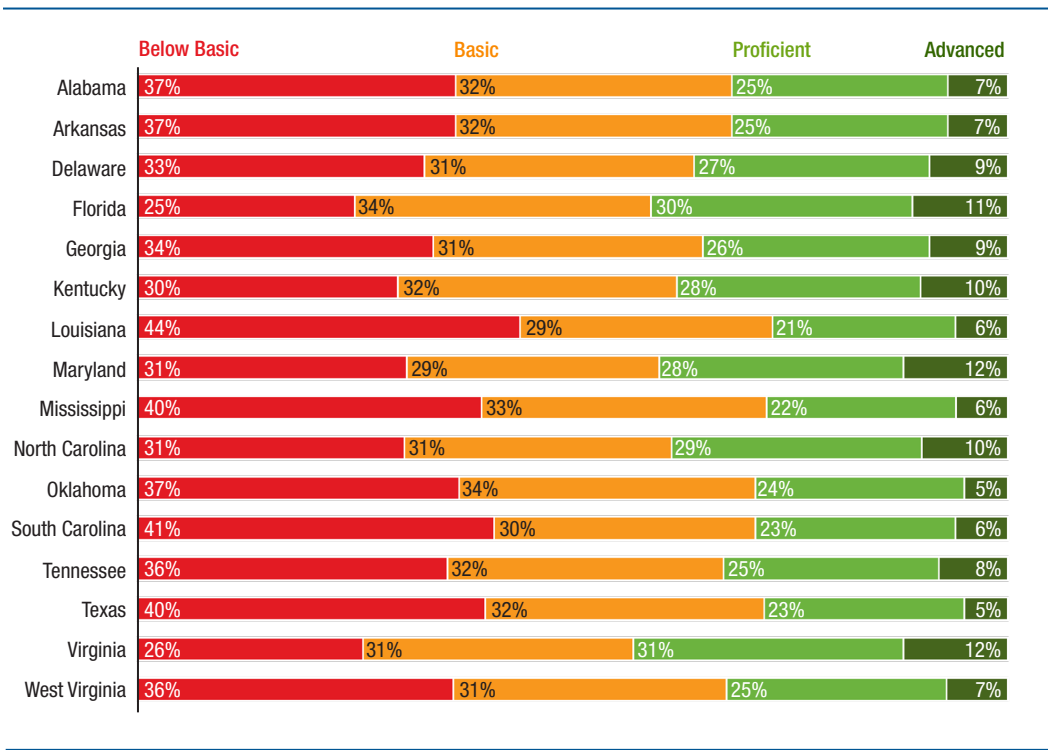
**Basic:** Partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at the grade level assessed.

**Proficient:** Solid academic performance for the grade level assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.

**Advanced:** Superior performance for the grade level assessed.

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics. The NAEP Glossary of Terms. [www.nces.ed.gov](http://www.nces.ed.gov)*

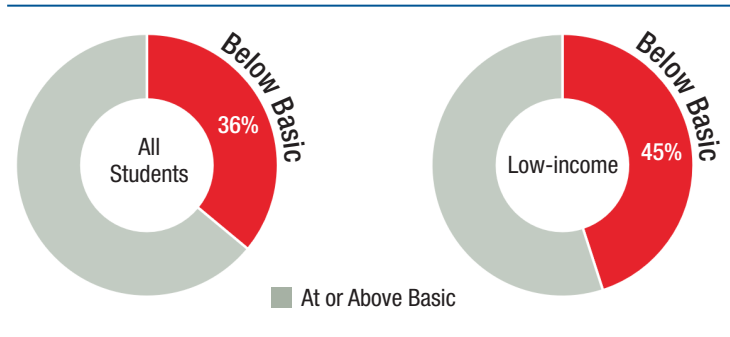
**FIGURE 1**  
**2017 Fourth Grade NAEP Reading Results by Level, SREB States**  
*All Students*



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

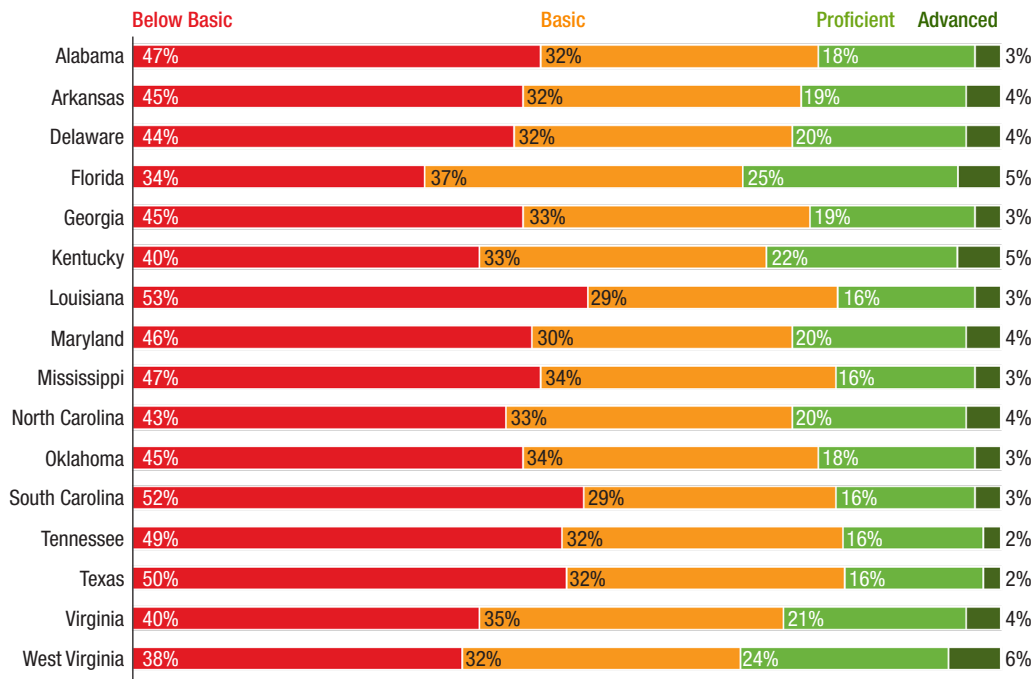
The rates are still more alarming for some subgroups of students. Children from low-income households — those children who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals — made up 57 percent of all public-school students in the SREB region in the 2015-16 school year. The following spring, 45 percent of fourth graders from low-income households in the median SREB state fell below the Basic level on NAEP in reading, with rates ranging from 34 to 53 percent across the region. Only 18 to 30 percent of these students performed at or above the NAEP Proficient level (see Appendix 2).

**FIGURE 2**  
**2017 Fourth Grade NAEP Reading Results, SREB Median**



Source: SREB, based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics

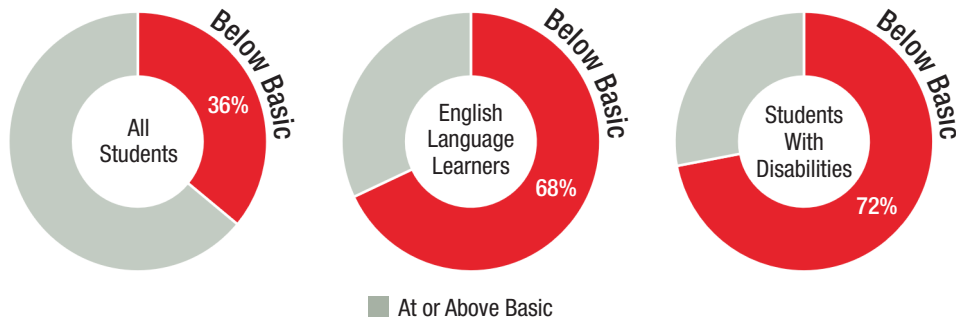
**FIGURE 3**  
**2017 Fourth Grade NAEP Reading Results by Level, SREB States**  
*Students from Low-Income Families*



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

English language learners and students with disabilities in the SREB region fared even worse. More than two-thirds — 68 percent — of English language learners fell below Basic on NAEP in reading in 2017. Among students with disabilities, the rate was 72 percent.

**FIGURE 4**  
**2017 Fourth Grade NAEP Reading Results, SREB Median**



Source: SREB, based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics

The fourth graders who fell below Basic on NAEP in reading did not suddenly begin to struggle that year. In fact, they had not acquired the reading skills they needed by the end of third grade. SREB recognizes that states need to do more to make sure all students leave the early grades prepared to succeed in fourth grade and beyond. **Research is clear on several key principles that states can focus on to help their youngest students read proficiently by the end of third grade and perform well on NAEP in fourth grade.**

**First**, teachers should teach young children to read using evidence-based instructional methods and materials that are aligned from pre-K to grade 3.

**Second**, schools need to assess each student's progress in reading regularly beginning in kindergarten, identify difficulties with literacy development early on, and intervene quickly to help all students who are struggling.

**Third**, any state policies that require reading proficiency by the end of third grade should ensure that students who do not meet this benchmark receive intensive remediation designed to catch them up as quickly as possible.

Comprehensive policies that address all these elements will support children in reaching the important goal of third-grade reading proficiency.

## Reading Skills Are Crucial for Long-Term Success

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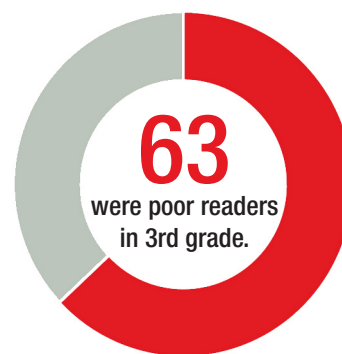
Reading is integral to learning, both as a student and as a lifelong learner. Early reading skills are strongly associated with later academic achievement, including high school and post-secondary completion. In a 2012 analysis, Hernandez found that 63 percent of students who did not graduate from high school on time had shown reading performance in third grade that was “roughly equivalent” to below Basic on NAEP. In contrast, only 4 percent of students whose third-grade reading skills measured up to the NAEP Proficient level did not graduate on time.

Not only do poor readers experience worse academic outcomes, but they are also at a disadvantage in the workforce. Economists predict that five million workers will lack the postsecondary education and training needed to be competitive in our nation's workforce by 2020. Ninety-nine percent of the jobs added to the economy in the past six years are held by workers who had some level of education or training after high school, and 93 percent of CEOs in a 2016 Business Roundtable survey said that reading and writing skills are important for current job openings in their companies.

Currently, most state standards for learning expect students to master the skills they need to read and understand unfamiliar texts by the end of third grade. While children continuously learn by reading, the National Governors Association advises that expectations for reading performance increase noticeably starting in fourth grade.

Students should be able to read fluently and comprehend informational texts by this point, especially in the areas of science and social studies. According to The Children's Reading Foundation, students in the fourth grade who are not reading at grade level may be unable to understand as much as half of the fourth-grade curriculum in print.

Out of every **100** students who did not graduate from high school on time,



Source: SREB, from Hernandez, D.J. (2012).

As they progress through school, students continuously build their vocabularies and content knowledge through reading — and without intensive support, those who are not reading on grade level cannot keep up. A 2014 report commissioned by ACT found that nearly two-thirds of students who were not proficient readers in fourth grade failed to meet an eighth-grade reading benchmark that would have put them on track for college and career readiness.

**For students to be prepared for learning in and beyond school, they need to be able to read proficiently by the end of third grade.**

## Standards, Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment Must Be Aligned

Every SREB state has taken steps to ensure that pre-K through third-grade standards for learning carefully build on skills from grade to grade — a concept called *vertical alignment*. The standards, curriculum, instruction and assessments within each grade must also be *horizontally aligned* to function as a cohesive system that supports all aspects of learning.

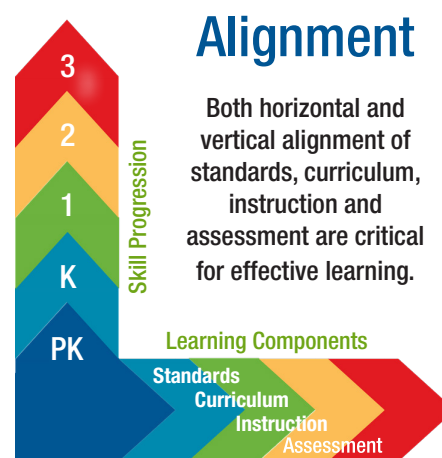
To teach reading effectively, teachers need a clear framework of research-based standards for the key knowledge and skills students should master by the end of the year. These standards should be taught using developmentally appropriate curricula and engaging instructional practices. Assessment in the early grades should take multiple age-appropriate forms and should help teachers better individualize their students' learning.

State standards for learning form the basis for what students are expected to know and do by the end of each grade. These standards need to consider what we know about children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Standards should carefully sequence skills so they build from one grade to the next, rather than unnecessarily repeating skills or leaving gaps in learning. Where reading is concerned, state standards should begin with the basic building blocks — vocabulary, phonics and phonemic awareness — and build toward reading fluency and comprehension.

Teachers need access to high-quality, evidence-based curricula and supplemental teaching materials that they can adapt to meet the needs of all students. As detailed in SREB's 2017 publication *Alignment of Instructional Materials: Trends in State Efforts*, these curricula and

materials, including textbooks, should be fully aligned to state standards. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, effective curricula are comprehensive: they address children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. Curricula and supplementary materials should also include resources for remediation, acceleration and exceptional learners. While child development follows a generally predictable trajectory, each child will learn and grow at her own pace and in her own way.

Teachers can use high-quality teaching materials and their own toolbox of instructional strategies to provide students with varied and meaningful learning experiences that teach to state standards. Providing developmentally appropriate experiences for young children — including goal-oriented play and warm, responsive interactions with adults — requires a certain level of expertise. Teachers need opportunities to develop and continuously refine this expertise through experience, training and collaboration with their peers across the early grades.



States and districts should use appropriate assessment practices to ensure that young children are meeting high expectations for learning. Assessments in all grades should be aligned to state standards for learning, as well as to the curriculum and instructional practices used to teach those standards. It is particularly important that assessments in the early grades be used to inform and adapt instruction to the varying needs of young students.

Assessing our youngest learners can be especially difficult because the paper-and-pencil tests that are commonly used for assessment are not developmentally appropriate. Using multiple developmentally appropriate methods — including observation and work samples — is a better way to obtain an accurate evaluation of young children's learning progress. If students in the early grades are given aligned and carefully-constructed standards, high-quality curricula, effective instruction and developmentally appropriate assessment practices, they will have all the school-based components they need to learn.

States can play an important role in helping teachers best use the resources at their disposal and develop their knowledge and skills. As acknowledged in SREB's 2016 report *Professional Learning: Trends in State Efforts*, many SREB states have already taken action to support their teachers at the local level, including providing resources and exemplars for quality professional learning experiences.

States should consider offering individual educators, leadership teams, and school and district leaders numerous ways to develop their skills through professional learning. Teachers need opportunities to collaborate with their peers, receive feedback from experts and reflect on their practice. As the body of research on teaching and learning evolves, so do the knowledge and instructional tools that educators need to effectively teach all subject areas, including literacy.

### An effective learning path for K-3 students requires . . .

... research-based, carefully sequenced standards for learning.



... teaching materials that are aligned to state standards.



... high-quality instruction from well-trained teachers.



... age-appropriate assessment practices.



## The Path to Reading Proficiency Begins in Early Childhood

**Building a strong foundation for reading proficiency by the end of third grade starts in infancy.** A substantial body of research shows that children's brains are forever shaped by their early environments and experiences. In 2014 and 2015 the SREB Early Childhood Commission drew together policymakers and education leaders to develop policy recommendations for early education. The resulting report, *Building a Strong Foundation*, reviews the research and explains the importance of early development in setting the stage for later learning. It makes clear that early language skills are fundamental to learning to read.

Children with poor language skills often struggle to learn early reading skills when they begin formal education. Those who do not grow up in an environment that promotes healthy development need compensatory experiences



to begin building the skills their peers have already acquired. The Annie E. Casey Foundation reported in 2013 that without intervention, the achievement gap that exists between poor readers and strong readers in kindergarten only widens as children continue through school.

**High-quality pre-K programs provide a learning boost and lasting benefits to children who need them the most.** Ensuring that children who are at risk for academic struggles have access to public preschool programs can help bridge the cognitive gap between them and their more affluent peers. Stephen Barnett with the National Institute for Early Education Research reports that the cognitive gains some public preschool programs produce are equivalent to roughly half of the achievement gap between children in poverty and children from more affluent households. The SREB region has taken note of this research: by 2014, every SREB state offered some portion of its four-year-olds a state-funded pre-kindergarten program.

“The cognitive gains some public preschool programs produce are equivalent to roughly half of the achievement gap between children in poverty and children from more affluent households.”

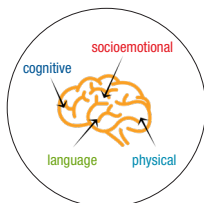
A 2017 consensus statement from The Brookings Institution’s Pre-Kindergarten Task Force provides a compelling reminder that research supports high-quality pre-K programs as a critical tool to promote school readiness, especially for children from low-income families. Dual language learners, who must simultaneously learn academic skills and a new language when they enter school, also reap some of the greatest benefits from pre-K.

The Task Force’s report indicates that the best pre-K programs provide young participants with enriching environments that support all areas of brain development. The preschool curriculum should be challenging but developmentally appropriate for young learners, with an emphasis on play and small-group learning experiences. While most pre-K programs use curricula focused on whole-child development, research shows that skill-specific curricula that provide sequenced, explicit instruction in specific academic or socioemotional skills are more effective at preparing children for school. As SREB also detailed in *Building a Strong Foundation*, pre-K programming should align with the content and skills that students must build in the years from kindergarten through third grade.

Pre-K teachers need to be prepared specifically to teach children age 5 and younger and should understand the progression of learning from pre-K through the early grades. The Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) finds that the most effective teachers often have at least a bachelor’s degree — but more importantly, they have specialized training in early childhood education or child development. Research by Bueno, Darling-Hammond, and Gonzales supports this advice and shows that pre-K teachers whose training includes early child development are better able to promote the development of three- and four-year old children’s language, cognitive and social skills. Pre-service and in-service teaching experiences, as well as ongoing coaching, mentoring and professional development opportunities, also help early childhood educators develop and refine their teaching skills.

### The best pre-K programs . . .

... support all areas of brain development.



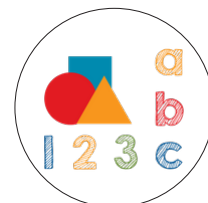
... emphasize play and small group learning.



... have teachers with specialized training.



... use skill-specific curricula.



## Kindergarten: An Important Transition to the Early Grades

The extent to which the boost from pre-K extends beyond kindergarten depends on the quality of a child’s education in kindergarten and the years that follow. Pre-K provides a foundation for the early grades, but it cannot stand separate from them. The Pre-Kindergarten Task Force calls for elementary schools to provide “on-going charging stations for learning” by reinforcing what children have learned in pre-K and continuing to develop their knowledge and skills through the early grades. Aligned pre-K through third grade standards, curricula and high-quality instruction are the groundwork for a cohesive learning environment. This kind of environment helps students build literacy skills each year and ultimately meet the third-grade milestone of literacy proficiency that points toward college and career readiness.

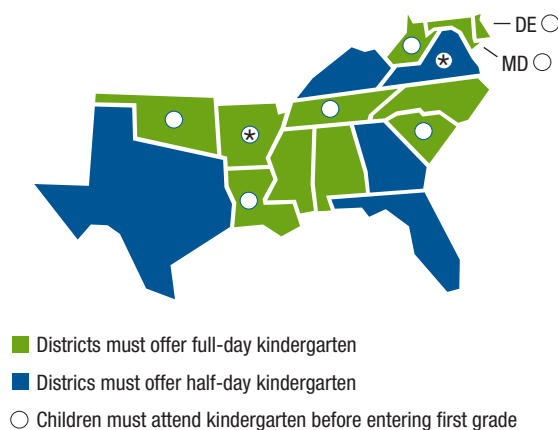
For children who did not attend pre-K, the skills taught in kindergarten are particularly important for building a foundation for learning in the early grades. States across the nation vary considerably in their policies for kindergarten attendance and format. In 2016 the Education Commission of the States (ECS) summarized research on full-day kindergarten that shows it is more beneficial than half-day kindergarten. Nationwide, 13 states and the District of Columbia required school districts to offer full-day kindergarten programs that year — and 11 of those states were in the SREB region.

Clearly, SREB states see the value of kindergarten for supporting gains made in pre-K and positioning students for future academic success. In fact, the mandatory, free, full-day kindergarten programs in Oklahoma and West Virginia have been recognized by ECS as models for implementation in other states across the country. However, there is room for improvement: seven SREB states mandate that districts provide kindergarten programs but do not require children to attend kindergarten before entering first grade.

**Children bring wide skill discrepancies to kindergarten classrooms.** Research shows that the higher academic performance of children who attended pre-K tends to converge with the achievement of their peers who did not, starting in kindergarten and continuing in the early grades. One likely explanation for this trend is that both pre-K

FIGURE 5

### Kindergarten Attendance Requirements in SREB States



★ A child who has not completed kindergarten may be evaluated to enter first grade.

Source: Education Commission of the States (2014, 2016) and SREB review of state documents.

and kindergarten classrooms serve children with a wide range of skills, experiences and abilities. A few students in each kindergarten classroom may already be reading age-appropriate books when they start school, but other children may not be able to identify colors, letters, or numbers, count to ten, or say the alphabet. For some, kindergarten is their first experience in which nearly everyone around them speaks English.

Providing an appropriate level of support in literacy development to children whose needs are so diverse is challenging for teachers. Children who come to school without basic skills require more attention from their teachers to reach grade-level standards by the year's end. This effectively means that children who do come to kindergarten with basic school readiness skills may not receive the support they need to build upon this boost. After all, they are already on track to meet kindergarten expectations.

Higher academic expectations in later grades have led the earliest grades to increase the rigor of their standards, too. University of Virginia researchers Bassok, Latham, and Rorem examined changes in kindergarten classrooms between 1998 and 2010, as reported by teachers. In 1998, only 31 percent of kindergarten teachers surveyed agreed that most children should learn to read in kindergarten. By 2010 this number had risen to 80 percent.

Current learning standards in every SREB state dictate that kindergarteners should be able to read *emergent-reader texts* consisting of simple words in repetitive patterns, supported by pictures that help tell the story. Children who enter school without alphabet and letter-sound knowledge have a long way to go if they are to independently read these simple books by the end of the kindergarten year.

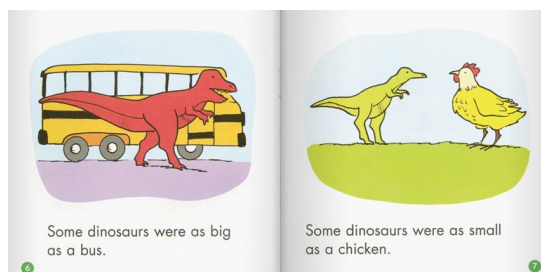
**Skilled teachers who can adapt instruction to the widely varying needs of their students are just as important in kindergarten — and first and second grades — as they are in pre-K,** especially for students

who are most at risk of poor academic outcomes. A 2015 study of kindergarten and first-grade students in Tennessee found that children who participated in Tennessee's state-funded pre-K program benefited *more* from having high-quality kindergarten and first-grade teachers than their peers who did not participate in the state pre-K program. Highly-effective teachers may be more adept at differentiating instruction and continuing to build upon each student's existing skills, thereby helping pre-K gains to last.

State policies in kindergarten need to empower teachers to address their students' individual learning needs and provide a recharging station for those who complete pre-K. This can help the pre-K boost continue past kindergarten and into later grades — and help close the achievement gap between at-risk students and their peers. Mathis from the National Education Policy Center writes that keeping class sizes small for our youngest learners enables teachers to spend more time working with them individually. He credits reductions in class size with positive, significant and long-lasting effects on student achievement. (See SREB's *Smart Class Size Policies for Lean Times* for more information on class size.)

There is no question, however, that reducing class size from current levels is costly. When funding is not available to provide small classes in all elementary grades, researchers — including Whitehurst and Chingos — agree that disadvantaged students in the earliest grades will benefit from it the most. Smaller kindergarten and first-grade classes with highly-effective teachers and strong, aligned curricula can be an effective way to boost learning in schools with large numbers of students who enter school without key readiness skills.

States expect their kindergarteners to be able to read a book with pages like these independently by the end of the school year.



*All About Dinosaurs* by Liza Charlesworth  
© 2010 by Scholastic Inc.

## Early Identification is Key to Preventing Future Reading Difficulties

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Researchers at the 2008 National Reading Conference agreed that state efforts should focus on the early identification of young children who lack strong language skills or struggle as beginning readers. Since then, a 2017 CEELo scan and SREB analysis of state policies show that the number of U.S. states using or piloting statewide kindergarten readiness assessments or an assessment of literacy skills at kindergarten entry has grown from seven in 2010 to 40 as of fall 2017, including every SREB state. Kindergarten readiness assessments are conducted at the beginning of kindergarten to identify the skills children have mastered and those they still need to develop. These assessments provide teachers with important data they can use to individualize instruction and target the skills their students lack. States that have a statewide readiness assessment can also use the results to spot common areas in which their children need additional support before entering school, as well as to identify pre-K programs or curricula that need improvement.

“State efforts should focus on the early identification of young children who lack strong language skills or struggle as beginning readers.”

Alabama, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Texas are currently piloting kindergarten entry assessment programs in some schools. In response to state legislation passed in 2016, Maryland now advises local school districts to choose whether to administer the state kindergarten readiness assessment to all incoming kindergarteners or only to a randomized sample of students in each classroom. All other SREB states required that all kindergarteners be assessed when they entered school in fall 2017.

This type of *formative assessment* provides important information about children's learning, both at the beginning of kindergarten and throughout elementary school. Formative assessments are low-stakes measures used to gauge student progress against designated benchmark goals so that teachers can adjust teaching and learning to better meet individual students' needs. Nearly all SREB states require that schools administer a formative or diagnostic reading assessment to students at some point during kindergarten through third grade. Most states require that formative assessments of reading be given on at least an annual basis; often, states recommend or require that students be assessed a minimum of three times per year.

Frequent formative assessment enables teachers to identify students who are not reading on grade level, provide additional support, and monitor their progress toward meeting grade-level goals. While all teachers informally monitor student progress through classroom and homework assignments, a school-wide formative assessment program for reading skills provides a measuring stick against which teachers and school leaders can compare their students' growth in reading within and across classrooms. These data can then be used to better target reading instruction for each grade level, and even the entire school.

*Summative assessments*, which are given at the end of a designated period of time, are used to evaluate student performance against grade-level standards and expectations. As required by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2016 and its predecessor, No Child Left Behind, every state administers a summative reading assessment in grades 3 through 8. In addition to the third-grade state-level reading assessment, nine SREB states also require that schools administer a summative reading assessment to students at least once during kindergarten through second grade. Eight of these states require that a summative assessment be administered annually in those grades.

While the results of summative assessments prior to third grade are not used for school accountability, measuring students' proficiency and progress in reading at the end of each year can help ensure that schools quickly identify students who continue to struggle and target them for intervention during summer or the following school year. Where summer reading programs are available, summative assessments may be used to determine which students are eligible to attend.

## Effective Intervention is Essential for Struggling Readers

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SREB has long held that reading assessments are only part of the equation. As far back as 2000's *Teaching All Children to Read*, SREB reported that effective reading reform must include high-quality instruction and intervention for struggling readers. Assessment tells us what students know and can do, but high-quality instruction and intervention can change learning trajectories.

Schmitt's 2008 review of research concluded that children who struggle to read at the end of first grade are likely to remain poor readers throughout elementary school. Getting struggling readers the help they need as early as possible is essential to ensure that students finish third grade as proficient readers. Every SREB state requires academic intervention prior to fourth grade for children who struggle with reading, and each has produced guidelines for implementing a multi-tiered model of intervention for students. In some states this is referred to as Response to Intervention (RTI); in others, it is part of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).

An effective multi-tiered intervention model provides a guiding structure for school staff to systematically identify and support students who experience difficulties at school. Half of SREB states explicitly require that all schools use this model to identify struggling students and provide them with increasingly intensive interventions. The remaining eight states strongly *encourage* each school or local education agency to develop and use a tiered intervention model in some form; many have established a state initiative to assist schools in implementation.

It is critical that states provide ongoing support and training at both the district and school levels so staff can implement these models effectively. States should also create a feedback and evaluation process to continuously improve and refine their efforts and address any challenges in implementation as they arise. Effective implementation depends on the fidelity with which individual teachers and schools use the RTI model. Its complexity requires continuous training and assistance from those with expertise in RTI.

A key component of the RTI framework is intervention instruction for struggling and at-risk students. Helping struggling readers reach grade-level expectations is not as simple as providing more of the same type of instruction. **Interventions for reading must be evidence-based and high quality.** The What Works Clearinghouse maintains a database of proven literacy interventions. A new website called *Evidence for ESSA* was also launched in February 2017 by the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University. It functions much like the What Works Clearinghouse, but has slightly different standards for evaluating the efficacy of reading and math programs, in accordance with new ESSA guidelines.

“The What Works Clearinghouse and Evidence for ESSA maintain databases of proven literacy interventions.”

Schmitt's 2008 review of the literature concluded that reading intervention programs based on intensive one-on-one tutoring are more effective than programs provided in any other format, including small groups. Supporting students one-on-one is resource-intensive, but preventing and addressing reading difficulties pays off in the long run. Reading Recovery, one well-known and well-researched reading intervention for first graders, includes up to 20 weeks of daily, individualized one-on-one reading instruction with a teacher extensively trained to use all facets of the program. Reading Recovery has been identified as one of the most effective interventions for reading by many researchers and evaluators, including the What Works Clearinghouse and Evidence for ESSA. That efficacy comes at a high cost, but according to the Every Child a Chance Trust, it also comes with as much as a 17:1 return on investment to schools and to society over a child's lifetime.

## A Closer Look at Quality Formative Assessment

North Carolina uses a comprehensive formative assessment system that provides teachers with feedback on individual students and the state with important student data. The state requires universal benchmark screenings in kindergarten through fifth grade at the beginning, middle and end of each school year, and provides for more frequent progress-monitoring assessments for struggling students. It adopted mCLASS Reading 3D, a reliable and valid online reading skills assessment program, for the benchmark screenings for students in kindergarten through grade 3.

mCLASS Reading 3D allows teachers and parents to view their students' scores and growth on each of its measures of reading skills. Parents are provided a very readable progress report after each benchmark assessment, along with suggestions for activities they can do at home with their child to strengthen weaker skills. Teachers have immediate access to student data and to a variety of tools to help analyze the data and inform their instruction. Student data are also available to the state and are used in evaluations of student learning growth.

States considering similar requirements for formative assessments need to consider the time they take to administer. Requiring that schools give more assessments or more frequent assessments means that instructional time will necessarily be reduced. However, if the assessments provide important information that is used to improve student learning, the tradeoff may be worthwhile. A 2014 study of the amount of time kindergarten through 12th-grade students in North Carolina spend taking tests estimated that the three mandatory mClass benchmark assessments take a total of about 21 minutes per student, per year. Assessments for a student reading below grade level who must be tested every 20 days take about one hour per student, per year. When multiplied by 20 or more students, the hours add up quickly.

### Example from the mCLASS Parent Report for a Second-Grade Student

#### What are the skills John should learn to become a good reader?



##### Phonemic Awareness

Hearing and using sounds in spoken words

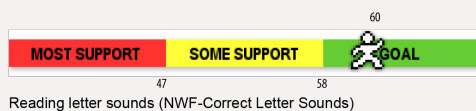
*We no longer measure John's phonemic awareness because students should have this skill by the middle of first grade.*



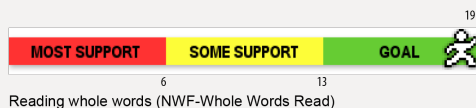
##### Phonics

Knowing sounds of letters and sounding out written words, measured by DIBELS Next Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF)

Can your child...  
...sound out simple words like van? (vvv...aah...nnn)  
...easily read a list of two- and three-letter words?



Reading letter sounds (NWF-Correct Letter Sounds)



Reading whole words (NWF-Whole Words Read)

#### Activities for John

Even if you have just a few minutes each day, you may be surprised by how much you can help John learn to read. Here are some activities we recommend based on John's most recent mCLASS reading assessment. Most of these activities can be done just about anywhere. Feel free to change them a bit to match John's interests or to fit your schedule.



#### Where John needs support



##### Accurate and Fluent Reading

Reading words in stories easily, quickly, and correctly

##### Memory

Choose five words your child is learning in school. Write each word down on two separate cards, making five pairs of cards, 10 cards in total. Shuffle the cards and place them in rows with the words facing down. Take turns turning over two cards at a time. Each player reads the words and collects the cards if they match. Keep playing until all the pairs are matched. The player with the most pairs wins.

## Diving into the Dyslexia Struggle

Dyslexia is a **language-based learning difference** characterized by difficulties with **phonological processing** — the process of recognizing the distinct sounds in spoken words and correctly associating letters with their respective sounds — and **phonemic awareness**, or the process of identifying and manipulating the smallest units of sound in spoken language. Linda Siegel, a noted Canadian researcher, explains that individuals with dyslexia struggle both with identifying and manipulating individual sounds of speech and with learning to correctly associate those sounds with their printed forms. Dyslexia often reveals itself early in elementary school as persistent difficulty with specific language skills, including learning letter sounds, sounding out familiar words, writing, and spelling. The extent of the difficulty varies from person to person and from mild to severe.

Researchers estimate that **dyslexia affects at least one in 10 people**, and according to the International Dyslexia Association, the true rate could be as high as one in five. The University of Michigan says that 70 to 80 percent of people with reading difficulties are likely to have some form of dyslexia. But according to the Dyslexia Research Institute, **only one out of every 20 people who have dyslexia are identified**. These rates mean that a typical elementary school serving 1,000 students likely has between 100 and 200 students who will have trouble with reading because of dyslexia. Identifying these children is crucial to providing the assistance they need to fulfill their potential.

Schools should be prepared to offer additional support to help children who exhibit characteristics of dyslexia be successful. Students with severe dyslexia that impairs their ability to learn effectively in the general education environment will require evaluation to determine their eligibility for special education services. These services can entitle them to individualized learning goals and specialized instruction from teachers who are trained to teach students with learning differences. Other students with less extensive reading difficulties may benefit enough from accommodations available to them under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 to progress through school without an individualized education program. With early identification and appropriate teaching methods that include a multisensory, structured approach to language skills, students with dyslexia can learn as well as other students. Identifying children who have dyslexia as early in their school careers as possible makes it more likely that they will be able to reach grade level in reading.

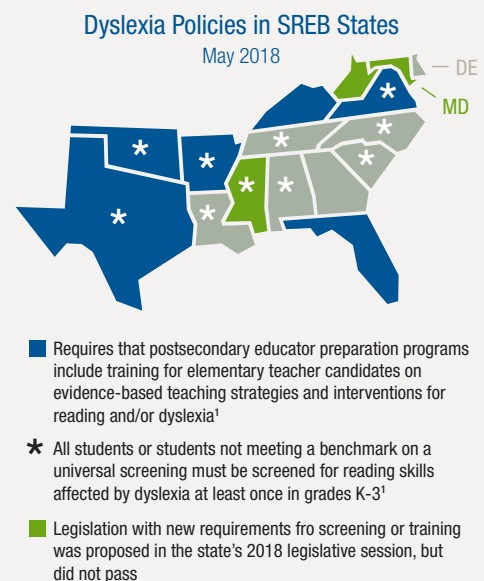
### State Policies Are Changing to Reflect Current Knowledge

SREB states have seen many developments in their policies related to dyslexia during the past five years. While **Louisiana** and **Texas** have required screening for dyslexia for decades, seven other states have recently implemented similar policies (*see map*).

Six SREB states require teacher preparation programs to provide candidates seeking certification that includes kindergarten through third grade with training on proven teaching methods for students with reading difficulties. Seven states require professional development for current teachers on recognizing dyslexia and using specific teaching methods for students who experience reading difficulties.

States continue to adopt and refine current policies related to dyslexia. In the 2018 legislative session, **Kentucky** passed a bill that will provide school districts with a toolkit to better serve students with dyslexia and require preservice teachers to receive training on proven interventions for dyslexia by 2020. **South Carolina** will require dyslexia screening for kindergarten and first grade students beginning in 2019-2020. Policy-makers in **Alabama**, **Maryland** and **West Virginia** also considered bills with new requirements for dyslexia screening or training for teachers.

For more information, see SREB's January 2018 brief, *Dyslexia Policies in SREB States*.



<sup>1</sup> In Kentucky, training must be implemented by 2019-2020. South Carolina's new screening requirements take effect in 2019-2020.

Source: SREB review of state documents

## Retention in Third Grade is Not a Silver Bullet

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The importance of reading skills in the early grades and the predictive power of reaching reading proficiency by third grade has led many SREB states to tie third-grade retention policies to reading assessment results. These policies end the use of age-based promotion and give struggling readers another year to reach grade level in reading before they move on to grades with even higher expectations for learning content from informational texts.

Nine SREB states currently require that third-grade students who do not meet a state-defined benchmark in reading be retained in third grade. Most of these states allow “good cause” exemptions for certain groups of students, like students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency. Many states also allow promotion for students who can demonstrate reading proficiency in other ways, such as through a work portfolio or on an alternate assessment. Students who are retained in third grade in Florida, North Carolina and Oklahoma may be promoted to fourth grade mid-year if they can demonstrate reading proficiency by November 1 of their second year in third grade.

Research on the effects of retaining students in third grade based on a reading benchmark score is mixed, in part because of factors that make it difficult to conduct sound research. The best studies compare students who are retained to similar peers who are promoted. However, the students in each group may differ in ways that make it difficult to truly compare their outcomes. Since retention itself is often considered an intervention, students who are promoted despite not meeting a reading benchmark may also receive support that their retained peers do not. In general, retention may help students perform better in their retention year, but Brookings Institution researcher Jacobs notes that it does not confer significant benefits that last.

“Retention policies need to be paired with high-quality systems of intervention and remediation to provide the support poor third-grade readers need to improve.”

Retention also means paying for an additional year of schooling. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau show that SREB states spent between \$8,900 and \$14,200 per student in fiscal year 2015. Multiply that by the number of students who are retained in third grade, and the price tag for retention grows quickly. Florida, for example, retained nearly 16,000 students in third grade at the end of the 2013-14 school year. At \$8,881 per student that year, this one cohort of third graders added more than \$141 million to the state’s overall cost for K-12 education.

Many organizations, including The Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2013, have argued that mandatory retention alone is not a policy strategy that will improve student achievement. Simply providing a student with the same curriculum and instruction for the second year in a row is not likely to produce an outcome much different from the first year. SREB has tracked similar findings for a long time. As far back as 2000, SREB’s *Teaching All Children to Read* reported that retention policies need to be paired with high-quality systems of intervention and remediation. Together, these elements provide the support third graders who are not reading well need in order to improve.

It is important that students who are struggling receive the support they need to be successful before retention is considered. Whether students not meeting a reading benchmark are retained or promoted, it is vital that they receive intensive intervention to help them catch up to grade level as quickly as possible. These students may benefit from smaller classrooms and highly effective teachers who can provide individualized instruction to meet their needs.

States in the SREB region have enacted several policies intended to produce better outcomes for students who do not meet a third-grade reading benchmark. Currently, seven states require intervention or specialized classroom instruction for students who do not meet a reading benchmark but are promoted under an exemption. Five of these



states also require specialized instruction for retained third graders. Four states require that retained students be assigned to a teacher with specific qualifications or qualities — generally, a “highly effective” teacher based on teacher evaluation or student data (*see Table 1*). Three SREB states require that students who are eligible for retention attend an intensive summer reading camp to help them try to achieve reading proficiency.

**TABLE 1**  
**Third Grade Retention Policies Based on Reading Proficiency, SREB States, 2018**

State	Retained students receive individualized instruction	Students promoted under exemption receive individualized instruction	Retained students assigned to teacher with specific qualities	Intensive summer reading camp required for students eligible for retention
Delaware		✓ *		
Florida	✓	✓	✓	✓
Georgia		✓ *		
Mississippi	✓	✓	✓	
North Carolina	✓	✓	✓	✓
Oklahoma	✓	✓	✓	
South Carolina	✓	✓		✓

\* For some students, depending on how they are promoted.

Source: SREB analysis of state documents

## Effective Reading Instruction Requires Training

The seminal National Reading Panel established in 2000 that effective reading instruction in the early grades must include explicit instruction in the **five essential components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension**. A more recent report from the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council explains that educators must also have training that prepares them to teach more advanced literacy skills, including listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and learning content through reading. Skilled teachers can scaffold their students’ use of language by building from what they know and providing increasingly difficult prompts and questions that are appropriate for the word knowledge of each child. Doing all of this well requires practice and training.

The National Reading Panel also examined the available research on teacher preparation and professional development in reading to determine best practices for teacher preparation programs and in-service training. However, the panel was unable to draw many useful conclusions because then-current practice involved a very broad array of strategies. In 2010, researchers with the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) surveyed more than 2,200 pre-service teachers about how much their preparation programs focused on the essential components of reading instruction. Only 25 percent of the pre-service teachers in the IES study reported that their preparation programs included a strong overall focus on reading instruction. Teachers were twice as likely to report a strong focus on reading instruction in their pre-service teaching experiences as in their pre-service coursework.

The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) finds additional evidence that preservice training for reading instruction is not adequate in many teacher preparation programs. The Council’s most recent evaluation of more than 800 undergraduate programs for elementary teacher education found that only 39 percent of programs examined included instruction in all five of the essential components of reading. However, this rate is on the rise nationwide and has increased by 10 percentage points since 2014. Some teacher education programs in SREB states are doing particularly well: six of the 13 programs recognized in the NCTQ report for their “A+” preparation for teaching early reading skills were in the SREB region.

The majority of SREB states have strengthened teacher preparation and certification requirements over the last decade to ensure that teachers are well qualified to teach reading in the early grades. As of May 2019, nearly all of the states in the region required elementary teacher preparation programs to cover the science of reading. Nine states required that teachers seeking licensure for the early grades pass an exam or exam subtest assessing their knowledge of scientifically based reading instruction. Seven states required that new elementary teachers receive training on dyslexia and effective teaching strategies for students who have dyslexia (*see Table 2*).

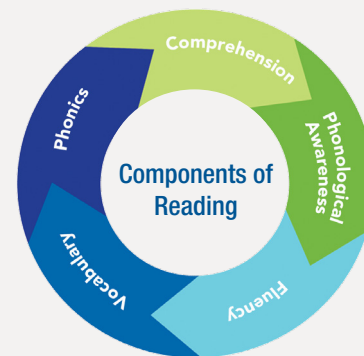
Some SREB states have also made efforts to support local education agencies as they strive to increase the number of students who read proficiently. Six states — Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia — now provide some form of state funding for reading coaches, specialists, or intervention teachers who can support teachers and students at the school or district levels. However, this funding is often subject to annual appropriation by the legislature, making it less certain from year to year. Arkansas, South Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia have also put in place legislative requirements for districts to provide coaches or specialists who can assist teachers and students with reading, literacy or dyslexia instruction.

Several researchers have found that teachers certified by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards are generally more effective than teachers who do not hold this additional certification. A recent study conducted in Mississippi by the National Strategic Planning and Analysis Research Center found that kindergarteners who

## A Closer Look at Effective Instruction for Reading

The 2000 National Reading Panel examined a wide body of research on scientifically-based teaching strategies and drew important conclusions about best practices for teaching young children to read. Researchers know that all students need instruction in five major skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Younger students benefit the most from instruction in sound identification, matching, and the segmentation and blending of phonemes. Networks of new vocabulary words need to be taught in context, not through memorization. And compared to other approaches to teaching early reading skills, phonics instruction leads to greater gains for children in grades K through 6, as well as for children who have difficulty with reading.

Effective reading instruction, especially for struggling readers, must be explicit. Teachers need to clearly model strategies and specific skills and demonstrate processes step-by-step. Effective instruction is also systematic; it is carefully sequenced by skill difficulty and paced in a way that provides students with sufficient time for mastery before moving on to a more challenging skill. Finally, good reading instruction provides many opportunities for guided practice and teacher feedback.



Source: Florida Center for Reading Research  
Used with permission

received reading instruction from a National Board-certified (NBC) teacher were 31 percentage points more likely to achieve a proficient score on the end-of-year kindergarten assessment than similar peers with non-NBC teachers. Third graders were 11 percentage points more likely to achieve a proficient score on the state English test if they had an NBC teacher for reading. States should consider the available evidence on the value of National Board certification when they consider teacher compensation policies that may encourage teachers to obtain this additional credential or discourage them from doing so.

**TABLE 2**  
**Elementary Teacher Preparation and Exam Requirements for Reading in SREB States, May 2019**

State	Teacher preparation must cover:		Required exam** assessing knowledge of reading instruction
	The five essential components of reading*	Identifying and teaching students with dyslexia	
Alabama	✓	—	<i>Praxis Teaching Reading</i>
Arkansas	Requires <sup>1</sup> that programs cover “the best practices of scientific reading instruction”	✓	<i>Pearson Foundations of Reading</i>
Delaware	Requires that programs include “research-based strategies for childhood literacy”	—	Praxis Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects or Praxis Elementary Education: Content Knowledge for Teaching
Florida	✓	✓ <sup>2</sup>	FTCE Elementary Education K-6: Language Arts and Reading Subtest
Georgia	✓	✓ <sup>3</sup>	GACE Early Childhood Education: Test 1
Kentucky	—	✓ <sup>4</sup>	Praxis Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects
Louisiana	✓	—	Praxis Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects
Maryland	✓	—	<i>Praxis Teaching Reading: Elementary Education</i> <sup>5</sup>
Mississippi	✓	—	<i>Pearson Foundations of Reading</i>
North Carolina	✓	—	<i>Pearson Foundations of Reading</i>
Oklahoma	✓	✓ <sup>2</sup>	OSAT Elementary Education: Reading and Language Arts Subtest
South Carolina	✓	—	Praxis Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects
Tennessee	✓	—	<i>Praxis Teaching Reading: Elementary Education</i>
Texas	✓	✓	<i>TEXES Core Subjects EC-6: ELA and Reading and Science of Teaching Reading</i>
Virginia	✓	✓	<i>Praxis Reading for Virginia Educators: Elementary and Special Education</i>
West Virginia	✓	—	<i>Praxis Teaching Reading: Elementary Education</i>

Tests/subtests are listed in *blue* if at least 50% of their content assesses candidates’ knowledge of scientifically based reading instruction and they provide a stand-alone score.

\* The five essential components of reading were determined by the 2000 National Reading Panel and include: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Scientifically based reading instruction addresses all of these components.

\*\* Required for the state license covering the most elementary grades

<sup>1</sup> Required by 2023

<sup>2</sup> State does not require training on dyslexia identification but does require preparation programs to include training on explicit, systematic and/or sequenced, multisensory instruction. This type of teaching is considered the best practice for teaching reading to students with dyslexia.

<sup>3</sup> A 2019 law established this requirement, but without an effective date.

<sup>4</sup> Required by 2019-2020, subject to available funds

<sup>5</sup> Beginning July 1, 2019

Source: National Council on Teacher Quality and SREB analysis of state documents

# Recommendations

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Developing and implementing effective state policies aimed at helping students become skilled readers requires collaborative efforts from policymakers, education leaders, and educators themselves. Achieving real change takes comprehensive, multifaceted policies within a framework that aligns goals and corresponding policies from birth through third grade and then links them with goals and policies in later grades. These efforts will require a long-term commitment over many years.

The recommendations below focus on ensuring that children are reading proficiently by the end of grade three. They echo some recommendations from the SREB Early Childhood Commission, particularly the ones that emphasize early childhood foundations for reading and literacy. If states continue to improve their efforts to address all facets of reading development from birth through third grade, increased reading proficiency rates for children in the SREB region will likely follow.

## Recommendation 1

### Recognize and support kindergarten programs as the entryway to the early grades.

*States should consider:*

- 1.1 Promoting kindergarten attendance for all children.
- 1.2 Ensuring that funding for kindergarten is sufficient to create a seat for all children from low-income families, for children who are dual language learners and for students with disabilities.
- 1.3 Keeping kindergarten class sizes small to enable teachers to individualize instruction.

## Recommendation 2

### Focus on early identification and intervention for struggling readers.

*States should consider:*

- 2.1 Establishing comprehensive systems of formative and summative assessment in the early grades to ensure that students are on track to read proficiently by third grade.
- 2.2 Ensuring that all schools use a multi-tiered system of intervention to identify struggling students and provide increasing levels of support.
- 2.3 Promoting the use of evidence-based interventions for struggling readers as early as possible and for as long as necessary to get students reading on grade level.
- 2.4 Ensuring that funding for reading assessment and intervention is reliable and adequate.

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### Recommendation 3

#### Develop effective promotion policies for third-grade students.

*States should consider:*

- 3.1 Providing multiple opportunities and methods for students to demonstrate reading proficiency.
- 3.2 Supporting intensive summer reading programs in schools as an additional way to help third graders reach reading proficiency.
- 3.3 Ensuring that students who are retained because they cannot demonstrate proficiency in reading and students who are promoted despite a lack of proficiency receive evidence-based, individualized support to help them reach grade level as quickly as possible.

### Recommendation 4

#### Place greater emphasis on reading instruction in teacher licensure requirements and in professional learning.

*States should consider:*

- 4.1 Requiring that preservice and practicing teachers of children in pre-K through third grade receive specialized training that includes all five components of reading instruction.
- 4.2 Requiring that new and existing teachers of children in pre-K through third grade receive training on recognizing and teaching children with dyslexia.
- 4.3 Offering individual educators, leadership teams, and school and district leaders numerous ways to develop their skills through professional learning.

## Appendices

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### APPENDIX 1

#### Percentage of Students Performing at or Above NAEP Achievement Levels in Reading *All Fourth Graders, 2017*

State	Below Basic	At or Above Basic	At or Above Proficient
<b>United States</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>SREB Median</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>33</b>
Alabama	37	63	31
Arkansas	37	63	31
Delaware	33	67	36
Florida	25	75	41
Georgia	34	66	35
Kentucky	30	70	38
Louisiana	44	56	26
Maryland	31	69	40
Mississippi	40	60	27
North Carolina	31	69	39
Oklahoma	37	63	29
South Carolina	41	59	29
Tennessee	36	64	33
Texas	40	60	29
Virginia	26	74	43
West Virginia	36	64	32

*Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress*

APPENDIX 2

Percentage of Students Performing at or Above NAEP Achievement Levels in Reading  
*Fourth Graders from Low-Income Families, 2017*

State	Below Basic	At or Above Basic	At or Above Proficient
<b>United States</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>SREB Median</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>22</b>
Alabama	47	53	22
Arkansas	45	55	23
Delaware	44	56	24
Florida	34	66	30
Georgia	45	55	22
Kentucky	40	60	28
Louisiana	53	47	18
Maryland	46	54	24
Mississippi	47	53	19
North Carolina	43	57	24
Oklahoma	45	55	21
South Carolina	52	48	19
Tennessee	49	51	19
Texas	50	50	18
Virginia	40	60	25
West Virginia	38	62	30

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress

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Southern Regional Education Board  
592 10th St., N.W.  
Atlanta, GA 30318-5776  
(404) 875-9211

**SREB.org**

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