



POLICY BRIEF

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AN EXPEDITION TO IMPROVE STUDENT READING

Exploring Third-Grade Retention and Early Literacy Policies in Missouri

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ADVANCING LIBERTY WITH RESPONSIBILITY
BY PROMOTING MARKET SOLUTIONS
FOR MISSOURI PUBLIC POLICY



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Reading and literacy have been foundational to education in the United States since its inception.
- Missouri’s reading scores have been falling overall and in comparison to other states.
- Early literacy reform is essential to improving education in Missouri. If students can better learn to read, they will be better equipped to read to learn in later grades.
- The growing body of research on the science of reading has identified numerous early literacy policies that have benefitted students across the country.
- Based on the recent success of states such as Mississippi, Indiana, and Tennessee—all states that have implemented significant literacy-based reforms—Missouri could improve student performance by adopting several key reforms:
 - Establish a **mandatory third-grade retention program** (with “good-cause promotions”) that connects state testing with an accountability system.
 - Fully **eliminate the use of the three-cueing method** for teaching word reading in Missouri’s classrooms.
 - **Reform Missouri’s teacher preparation programs** to ensure they train prospective Missouri teachers in the science of reading.

READING TRENDS IN MISSOURI AND BEYOND

In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson signed one of the greatest deals in the history of our country, the Louisiana Purchase.¹ Not long after Lewis and Clark embarked across Missouri, it was admitted as the 24th state in the nation in 1821. Thinking back to that time, one might wonder: how many U.S. citizens were able to read the newspaper announcing the historic news?

As it turns out, quite a few.

In the early 1800s, while the United States was still a fledgling nation, it is estimated that nearly 90 percent of New England men were literate. As one source from the time proudly stated, “No country on the face of the earth can boast a larger proportion of inhabitants, versed in the rudiments of science, or fewer, who are not able to read and write their names, than the United States of America.”² Reading and literacy have long been important components of American civic life.

Unfortunately, however, reading proficiency in the Show-Me State has been trending downward in startling fashion. In 2003, Missouri ranked 14th out of the 50 states in fourth-grade reading according to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), also referred to as “The Nation’s Report Card.” In eighth-grade reading, Missouri ranked 13th. But two decades later, in 2024, only 27 percent of fourth graders and 26 percent of eighth graders in Missouri could read at the Proficient level or higher on the NAEP, placing Missouri at 38th and 32nd in the nation, respectively (Figures 1 and 2).³

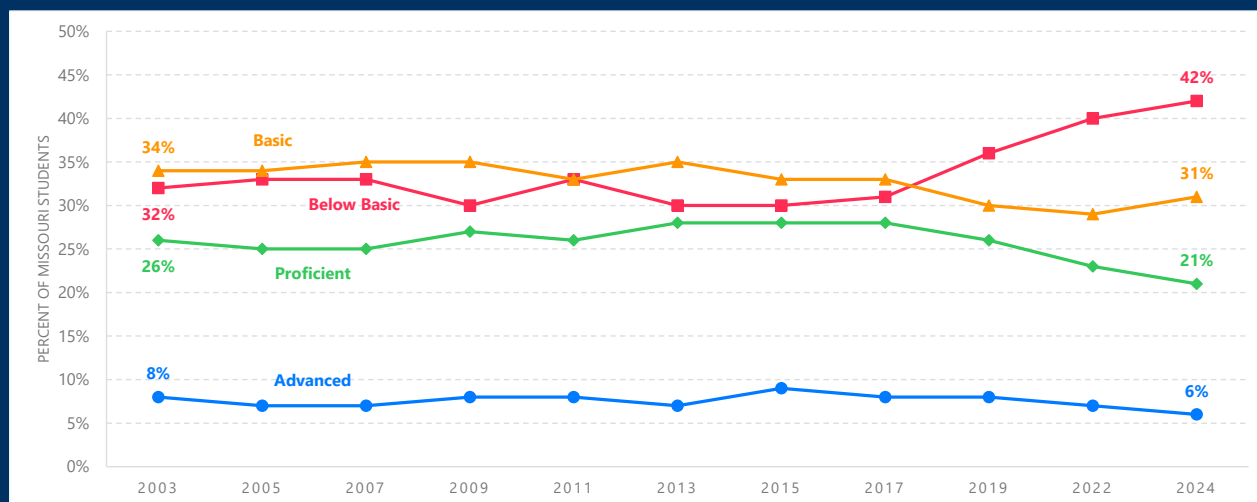
These results are not outliers. The patterns seen in the NAEP data are also broadly reflected in state testing data from the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP; see Figure 3).⁴ State assessment data starting from the 2017–18 school year are used because it is the first year of the latest state-designed MAP test.⁵ The data show declines in reading proficiency in grades three through eight, especially since the pandemic. The appendix contains three figures detailing MAP performance for fourth, sixth, and eighth grades. Some potential reasons for this decline include lack of strong accountability measures, pandemic disruptions, distractions caused by cell phone use, and maintaining the status quo in a changing educational environment.

There is, however, reason to believe that Missouri schools can turn things around. Schools in numerous other states—such as Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee are having success in improving student literacy.⁶ A common thread among these states is that they have all placed a strong emphasis on the science of reading (Box 1) and early literacy policies.⁷

Figure 1

Performance of Missouri Fourth Graders on the Reading Portion of the NAEP by Category, 2003–2024

Missouri's reading scores have been trending downward for the past decade, with an alarming number of fourth graders scoring Below Basic following the COVID-19 pandemic.

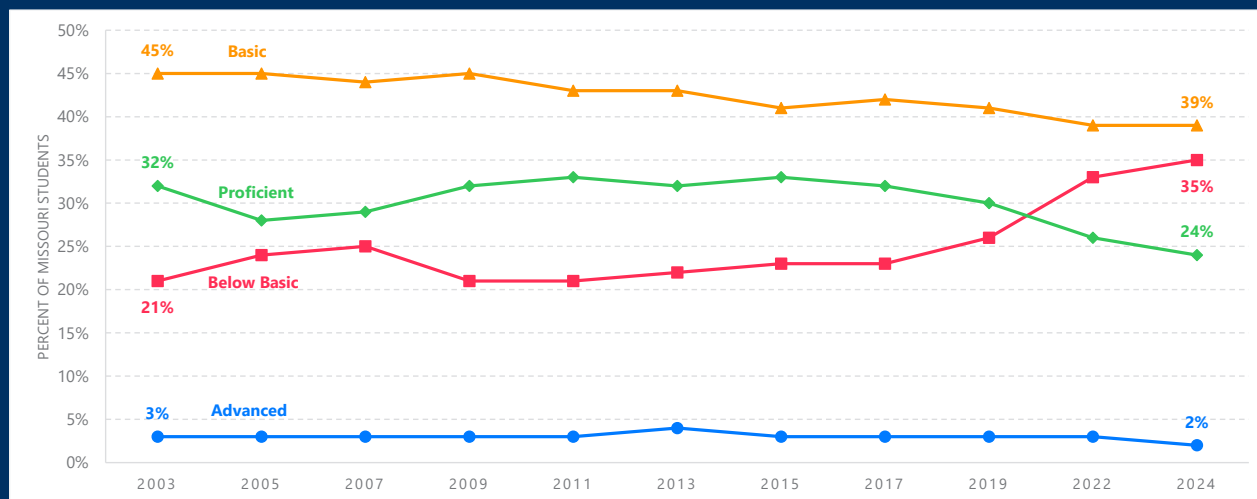


Source: *The Nation's Report Card, State Profiles.*

Figure 2

Performance of Missouri Eighth Graders on the Reading Portion of the NAEP by Category, 2003–2024

In 2024, more Missouri eighth-graders scored Below Basic than both Proficient and Advanced combined.

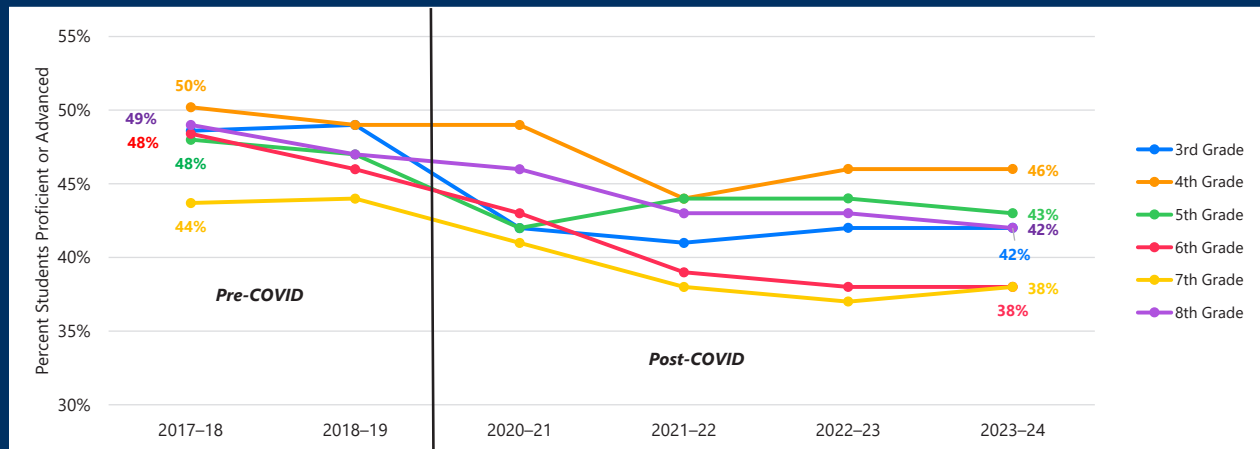


Source: *The Nation's Report Card, State Profiles.*

Figure 3

Missouri English Language Arts Scores on the MAP, 2017–18 to 2023–24

Across all grade levels, proficiency rates have declined since the pandemic. Further, scores for most grade levels have worsened since the first assessment after COVID.



Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

Box 1

WHAT IS THE SCIENCE OF READING?

According to the National Center on Improving Literacy, the science of reading is a growing collection of research that identifies the most effective way to teach students to read. There are five core components:

1. **Phonemic awareness:** The ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words
2. **Phonics:** Instruction focused on connecting individual letters and groups of letters to the sounds they represent and vice versa
3. **Fluency:** The ability to read text accurately, smoothly, and with the right expression
4. **Vocabulary:** Knowing what words mean and when to use them
5. **Comprehension:** Understanding a passage's meaning, message, and subject matter

These are the skills effective readers rely on, and the skills that our students need to master.

Source: National Center on Improving Literacy. "The Science of Reading: An Overview, 9 May 2025, www.improvingliteracy.org/resource/the-science-of-reading-an-overview.

In terms of timing, research supports focusing literacy instruction in early grades on helping students develop the ability to decode and recognize words⁸—in essence, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary. Reading a sentence should become smooth and automatic.⁹ Around the fourth grade the instructional focus shifts, and students concentrate on learning how to comprehend and understand texts. Put another way, students transition away from *learning to read* and toward *reading to learn*.

It makes intuitive sense that improving students' literacy skills in the early grades will allow them to be more successful in the classroom for the rest of their schooling careers, and this is the logic behind the early literacy reform movement.¹⁰

TEACH A MANTO FISH, TEACH A KID TO READ

The “fourth-grade reading slump” is a well-documented phenomenon in education.¹¹ It describes the drop in reading achievement some students experience when

Box 2

EXCELINED'S 2021 EARLY LITERACY POLICY CHECKLIST

- ✓ Science of reading training for teachers
- ✓ Literacy/reading coaches to help teachers instruct students in the science of reading
- ✓ Ensuring teacher preparation programs are preparing candidates to be able to teach the science of reading
- ✓ Funding for literacy efforts
- ✓ Early screening (K–3) to identify students with reading deficiency
- ✓ Screening (K–3) to identify students with dyslexia characteristics
- ✓ Parents of students with reading deficiency are notified
- ✓ District adoption of high-quality instructional materials grounded in scientifically based reading research
- ✓ Individual reading plans for K–3 students with reading deficiencies
- ✓ Regularly monitor students and adjust instruction to close gaps
- ✓ Evidence-based interventions for struggling students before and after school
- ✓ Summer reading camps or approved summer reading programs provided for all struggling K–3 students
- ✓ Parent engagement: at-home reading strategies
- ✓ Third-grade retention and intensive intervention for students severely below grade-level
- ✓ Multiple opportunities for fourth-grade promotion
- ✓ Good cause exemptions for students to be promoted (e.g., English as second language, previously held back)

Source: *Comprehensive Early Literacy Policy: State-by-State Analysis of Fundamental Principles*, ExcelinEd, 2021, thepolicyminute.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ExcelinEd_PolicyToolkit_EarlyLiteracy_StatebyStateAnalysis_2021.pdf.

instruction shifts its focus to reading comprehension. Students who have not yet developed sufficient phonics and fluency skills struggle disproportionately with increasingly complex texts.¹² They are expected to analyze and comprehend passages while they struggle to decode individual words, making it difficult to keep pace with their peers.¹³

John Westall and Amy Cummings of the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at the College of Education at Michigan State University released a comprehensive national analysis of state literacy policies in 2023.¹⁴ They designed their analysis around ExcelinEd's checklist for early literacy policies, which includes 16 components that cover teacher support, student assessment, parental involvement, and instruction and intervention policies (such as grade retention). Box 2 displays the 16 components of a “comprehensive early literacy policy” as defined by ExcelinEd.

Westall & Cummings classify states as having a “comprehensive” policy if they satisfy all 16 criteria. During the period covered by their study, 12 states had a comprehensive policy by this definition.¹⁵ They also compare states that have at least one early literacy component to those with none, and they compare states that do and do not have literacy-based third-grade retention policies. They assess the effectiveness of these policies using student performance on state tests from 2009 to 2018 and on NAEP from 2003 to 2019. Many states have changed their policies recently, which permits an evaluation of how student reading performance was affected when the changes happened compared to “control group” states that did not make such changes. A map of the different states and their groupings appears in the appendix.

State-level assessments, like the MAP in Missouri, are defined as “high-stakes assessments,” whereas the NAEP is defined as a “low-stakes assessment.” The reason for this distinction is that in states that reward and sanction schools and districts based on test performance, these rewards and sanctions are based on the state tests, not NAEP.

Some key findings from Westall & Cummings' analysis include:¹⁶

- There is a positive, statistically significant effect on third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade reading scores in states with any early literacy policy relative to states with none. The effects are in the early grades and on high-stakes assessments only.
- States with policies that mandate third-grade retention see significant and persistent increases in high-stakes reading scores. Westall and Cummings further note there is no consistent evidence that reading scores increase in states without a retention component. However, there is also no consistent evidence of third-grade retention alone increasing low-stakes reading scores.
- Lastly, states with comprehensive early literacy policies experience significant and sustained increases in high-stakes and low-stakes reading scores following adoption.

These findings suggest a path forward for Missouri: Implementing comprehensive literacy reforms (including third-grade, literacy-based retention) could help change the recent downward trajectory in test scores statewide.

Missouri has adopted several of the components of a comprehensive literacy policy as recommended by ExcelinEd, but currently our policies fall short of what research suggests is needed. Additional steps could be taken to improve reading instruction, strengthen accountability, and support students and teachers alike. The following section proposes potential pathways to strengthening Missouri's literacy policies.

CHARTING MISSOURI'S PATH FORWARD IN EARLY LITERACY

Mandatory Third-Grade Retention, with Multiple Opportunities to Advance

Westall and Cummings found that third-grade retention is critical to increasing high-stakes reading scores (such as the MAP). Missouri could benefit from a mandatory third-grade retention policy based on academic triggers. States including Mississippi, Florida, and South Carolina have adopted these kinds of mandatory retention policies as part of a broader focus on education reform.¹⁷

In 2022, Missouri enacted significant early literacy reform with the passage of Senate Bills 681 and 662.¹⁸ The legislation eliminated Missouri's prior mandatory summer school and fourth-grade retention policies.¹⁹ In its place, the new law requires that any student in K–5 who is at risk for dyslexia or reading one or more grade levels below expectations receive a Reading Success Plan (RSP). These individualized plans must include:

- Targeted, evidence-based reading instruction
- Regular parent notifications and progress updates
- Resources for supporting reading at home

Additionally, if a student is reading below a third-grade level by the end of third grade, the school and parent must meet to discuss promotion or retention (rather than having retention be triggered automatically).

Missouri could benefit from adopting a mandatory third-grade retention policy contingent on objective academic benchmarks, rather than discretionary decisions. If the state decides to adopt and enforce a mandatory retention policy based on pre-set criteria, it is worth considering the trade-off between social and academic promotion. In their extremes:²⁰

- Academic promotion dictates that students must demonstrate mastery of the material for each grade-level before they advance to the next grade.
- Social promotion is based on age and matches students with similarly aged peers throughout their school experience, regardless of academic progress.

Most Missouri school districts blend these concepts to some degree, but in practice, policies tend to lean heavily toward the social promotion side.

Until relatively recently, many states used a similar approach. However, given the importance of reading skills for long-term success in school, the use of literacy-based academic promotion has become increasingly popular. Most states that have implemented academic-promotion policies focus on reading comprehension at the end of third grade as the key academic determinant. Third grade is an intuitive cut point because this is the point in the schooling career where students transition from learning

to read versus reading to learn.²¹ It is also early enough in a child's developmental processes that the negative social-stigma effects of grade retention are not yet as problematic as they will be as the child gets older.²²

Missouri could adopt a mandatory third-grade retention policy with multiple chances to advance. Under this policy, students would need to meet an established reading benchmark by the end of third grade to advance to fourth grade. Students who do not meet the initial threshold on a state literacy assessment would attend a mandatory, reading-intensive summer camp designed to help them catch up. At the conclusion of the camp, students could still be promoted if they re-take and pass the third-grade summative reading test by scoring above the set promotion threshold. For students who still do not qualify, a final opportunity could be available just before the start of the next school year, providing one last chance to advance after a summer of reading camp, targeted instruction, and home reading.

Some exceptions might be needed, such as for students with documented disabilities who would not benefit from retention, English learners with a limited history of English instruction, and for students who have been held back previously. These types of exceptions are found in policies in other states, such as Mississippi and South Carolina.²³

Outside of these exceptions, a third-grade retention policy would benefit most Missouri students who struggle to read. It would align state testing with an accountability system built to intervene effectively when needed. While retention is a difficult experience, research consistently shows that students who are retained under these types of policies benefit tremendously in terms of their on-grade academic achievement.²⁴

Elimination of the Three-Cueing Method

Three-cueing is an approach to teaching reading that relies on text (the letters on the page) as little as possible and instead uses language cues. ExcelinEd describes it like this:²⁵

Instructional strategies that employ the three-cueing systems model of reading include visual memory as the basis for teaching word recognition or [using] meaning, structure and syntax, and visual [cues].

Reading is not an intuitive skill—rather, it is learned. Consider learning to shoot a basketball. There is a preferred form, and players who learn it early tend to become more accurate and consistent. But a child left to figure it out on his or her own may learn bad habits and end up with a jump shot that “works,” but inconsistently, and is harder to fix later. In the same way, poor reading strategies like three-cueing can become ingrained if not corrected early.

For example, with three-cueing, a student might see a picture of a cat, glance at the first letter “c,” recognize that it is a short three-letter word, and simply guess that the word says *cat*, even if the word is another short word like *can* or *cap*. This guessing strategy may allow them to get by temporarily but leaves them unprepared to accurately and consistently read unfamiliar or more complex words like *development* and *deployment*.

Reading instruction should be grounded in the skills that lead to fluent reading from the beginning.²⁶ We should teach students to practice reading using the skills effective readers rely on.

Research consistently shows that students become fluent readers by learning to:

- Decode: connecting letters and letter patterns to spoken sounds
- Encode: connecting spoken sounds to written letters when spelling

Over time, skilled readers come to read every letter rapidly and fluently as they connect the letters’ sounds with their oral vocabulary out loud or silently. Truly fluent readers perceive each and every letter of print. In contrast, the three-cueing system encourages students to rely more on memorization, on contextual clues, or on how the “whole word” looks.²⁷

Legislation initially introduced during Missouri’s 2025 legislative session would have banned the use of three-cueing to teach reading statewide. But the final bill (Senate Bill 68) only barred three-cueing from being “a primary instructional method.” This phrasing is vague and could allow for the continued usage of three-cueing in Missouri

classrooms. Missouri should fully prohibit three-cueing for teaching reading in Missouri.²⁸

Evaluation and Alignment of Teacher Preparation Programs

Work can also be done to ensure that teachers in Missouri are properly trained using known effective strategies for teaching reading. The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) in 2023 released a survey evaluating which universities are implementing scientifically based reading instruction in their curriculum, and nearly half of Missouri’s participating universities²⁹ received an F (see endnote for full list).³⁰ Teachers should be prepared to teach evidence-based methods without relying on less effective ones.

Indiana requires programs that certify teachers to include content based on the science of reading in their curricula, and it prohibits teacher preparation programs from using content based on the three-cueing method.³¹ If students should not be using three-cueing, then teachers should not be taught this method. Because the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) must approve all programs that are permitted to certify teachers in Missouri, it would be relatively straightforward to implement this change: DESE could simply require this curricular adjustment for program accreditation.

CONCLUSION

For students to learn by reading, they must first learn to read. More and more states are recognizing this fundamental fact and implementing modern literacy policies, many of which focus on literacy in the third grade. Missouri should join the growing list of states that have adopted these policies. Most notably, research supports phonics-based instruction and mandatory third-grade retention as key policy levers that can make Missouri children more effective readers.

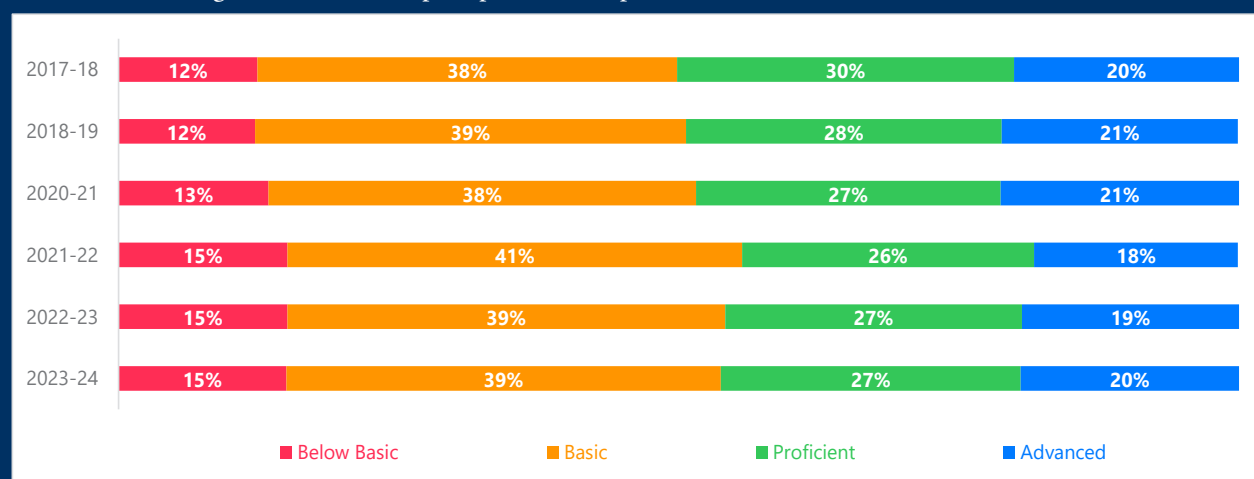
Putting such reforms in place will require alignment among state agencies, teacher preparation programs, K–12 schools, state assessment systems, and accountability frameworks. With an agreed-upon destination and a plan for getting there, Missouri can make students stronger readers and become a model for other states to follow.

APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL FIGURES

Figure A

Missouri Fourth-Grade ELA MAP Scores by Category, 2017–18 to 2023–24

Missouri's fourth-grade scores saw a post-pandemic dip from which students have not recovered.

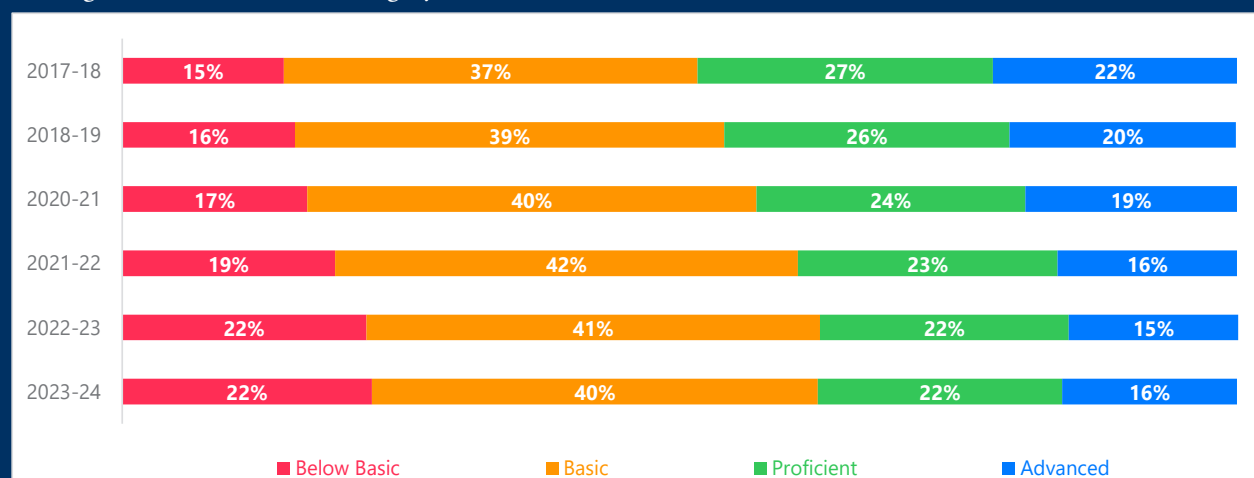


Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

Figure B

Missouri Sixth-Grade ELA MAP Scores by Category, 2017–18 to 2023–24

Missouri's sixth graders have seen a more significant decrease in scores, with seven percent more students scoring in the "Below Basic" category.

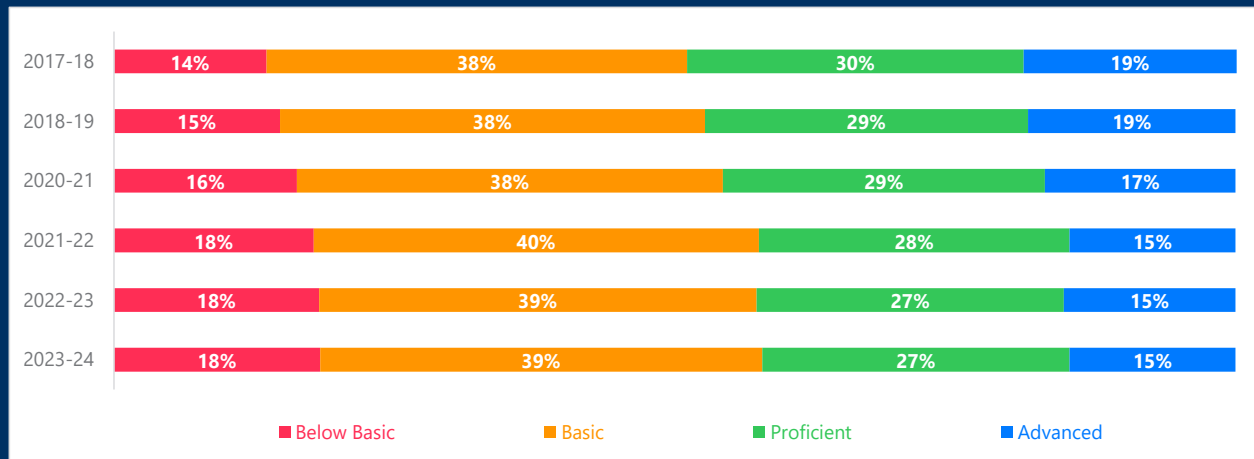


Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

Figure C

Missouri Eighth-Grade ELA MAP Scores by Category, 2017–18 to 2023–24

Missouri's eighth-grade scores decreased following the pandemic, and have remained rigid since.

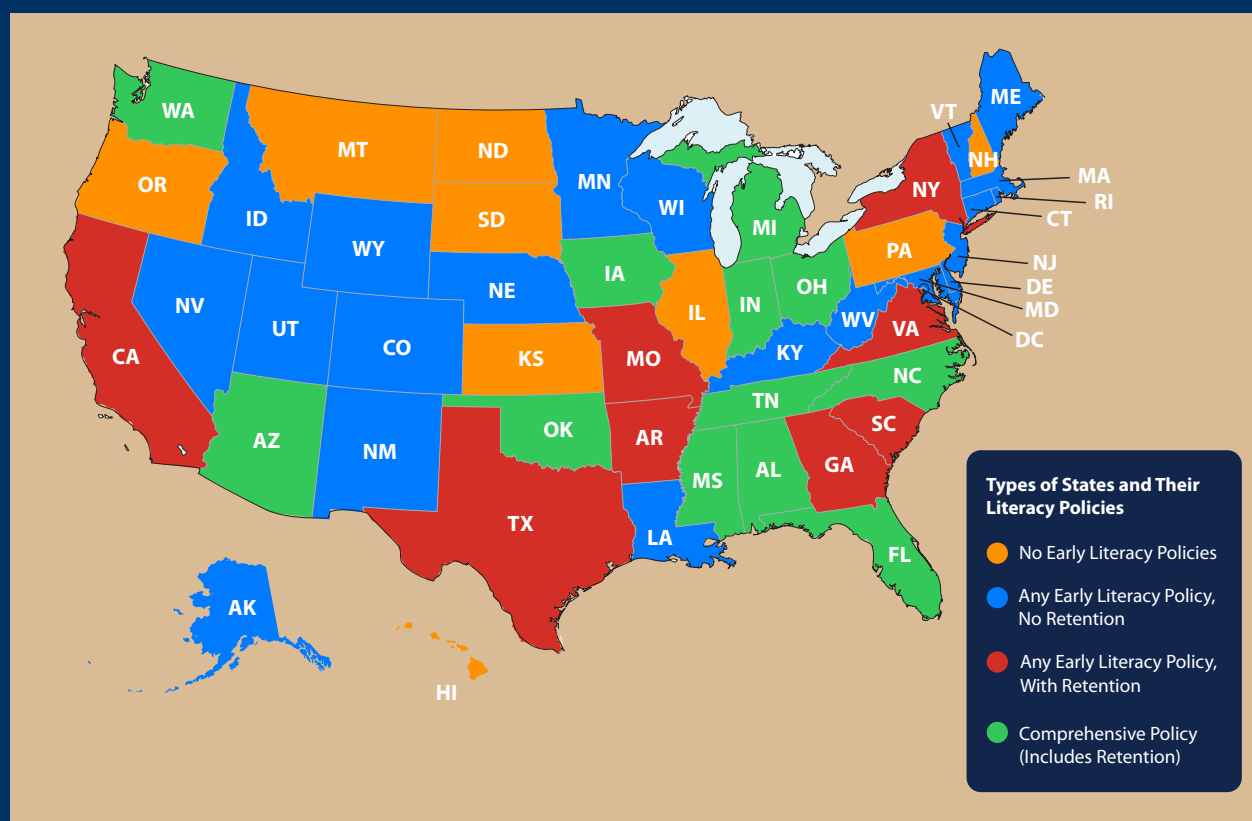


Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

Figure D

Early Literacy Map Used for Westall and Cummings' (2023) Study, Based on ExceInEd's Policy Checklist, 2021

In 2021, Missouri had a mandatory fourth-grade retention policy in place (before it was amended in 2022). States with a comprehensive early literacy policy saw sustained, increased scores in both high-stakes and low-stakes assessments.



Source: Westall, John, and Amy Cummings. "The Effects of Early Literacy Policies on Student Achievement." *Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC)*, June 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4427675>.

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