



42% OF MISSOURI'S FOURTH-GRADERS CAN BARELY READ

As Missouri test scores hit a 20-year low, states like Mississippi prove that strong reading reforms work.

We should do what they're doing. Let's start with three steps:

- 1** Give every third-grade student in Missouri the same reading test to see if they are ready for the fourth grade.
- 2** Set one statewide standard that clearly defines what it means to pass that test and demonstrate basic reading skills.
- 3** If a child fails the test twice at the end of third grade, require them to repeat the grade (with some exemptions).

Different schools in Missouri use different reading tests, and there is no statewide score that counts as "passing."

In fourth grade, instruction shifts from learning to read to reading to learn—and unprepared students typically fall further behind.

This crisis will not fix itself. Policymakers need to act. It's time to change the law so every Missouri child has the best chance to become a confident, capable reader.

**Talk to a
Policy Expert**

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MISSOURI MUST ACT TO REVERSE ITS READING DECLINE

42% of Missouri fourth-graders can barely read, our worst result in 20 years.

The Policy



Missouri's reading crisis will not fix itself. Policymakers must act to require a universal reading screener, set one clear statewide standard for passing, adopt a third-grade retention rule based on passing the screener (with some exemptions), and fully ban three-cueing.

Early Literacy Policy Checklist



- Establish a mandatory third-grade retention program based on a uniform, objective reading test.
- Allow "good-cause exemptions" for students with disabilities, students with limited English experience, and students who were retained previously.
- Fully eliminate the three-cueing method for teaching reading.
- Require programs that certify teachers to include science-of-reading curriculum, and prohibit them from teaching prospective teachers the three-cueing method.

Despite clear evidence that the three-cueing method is less effective, Missouri still allows it in both our classrooms and our teacher preparation programs.

Science of Reading

- Rooted in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension
- Relies more on decoding and encoding: connecting letters to spoken sounds and vice versa

Three-Cueing Method

- Rooted in word recognition, text structure and syntax, and visual cues
- Relies more on memorization, context clues, and how the “whole word” looks

Don't We Have This Already?



Missouri does not use one universal screener.

The state still allows both schools and teacher preparation programs to use weaker methods, like three-cueing, to teach reading.

Missouri officially has a third-grade retention law, but it is not mandatory nor tied to a uniform, objective assessment, and there is no evidence it is in active use.

For too long there has been division on this topic. Missouri can help more students become confident, capable readers by following the playbook from successful states like Mississippi.

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MISSOURI'S READING CRISIS: WHAT POLICYMAKERS NEED TO KNOW FOR 2026

1. How serious is Missouri's reading crisis?

42% percent of Missouri fourth-graders can barely read according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

2. What changes would make the biggest immediate difference?

Three key reforms are needed:

- A universal reading screener
- Third-grade retention for students who do not pass the screener
- The elimination of the three-cueing method in Missouri's classrooms and teacher preparation programs

3. What is a reading screener?

A screener is a short, research-based test given to students in grades one through three to evaluate their ability to read.

4. Why does Missouri need a universal reading screener?

A universal screener would help Missouri reliably identify struggling readers early, measure progress consistently, and hold all schools to the same expectations. Right now, different schools use different screeners and there is no universal score that counts as passing.

5. What is a strong third-grade retention policy?

Any student who cannot pass the universal reading screener at the end of third grade should repeat the grade and then retake the screener. Exemptions should be given to certain students with disabilities, those with limited English experience, and those who have been retained previously.

6. Why is third grade so important?

By third grade, students must learn to read so they can read to learn. In fourth grade, instruction shifts to using reading to understand all other subjects. Students who cannot read by third grade rarely catch up.

7. Why phonics-based instruction?

Phonics has a long, proven track record of helping students learn to read. Missouri should end the use of weaker methods, such as three-cueing, which encourage guessing instead of reading.

8. Do these reforms work in other states?

Yes. States with strong early literacy policies, such as Mississippi, Florida, Indiana, and Louisiana, have raised reading scores and helped more students reach grade level. Missouri can do the same.

9. Don't we already have these policies in Missouri?

No. Missouri does not use one universal screener. The state still allows both schools and teacher preparation programs to use weaker methods, like three-cueing, to teach reading. Missouri officially has a third-grade retention law, but retention is neither mandatory nor tied to a uniform, objective assessment, and there is no evidence it is in active use.

10. What should policymakers do in 2026?

Missouri's reading crisis will not fix itself. Policymakers must act to require a universal reading screener, set one clear statewide standard for passing, adopt a third-grade retention rule based on passing the screener (with some exemptions), and fully ban three-cueing.

11. Will the new screener replace existing district reading tests or add to them?

Missouri already requires that each district assess reading for K–3 students. This change would just make districts use the same test and passing threshold. In fact, this policy would reduce the burden on districts by focusing screening exclusively on grades one to three while also allowing the universal screener to satisfy existing dyslexia screening requirements.

12. Kids develop at different rates. Why place a harmful label on them at such a young age?

Retention is certainly a difficult experience, and care should be taken not to place labels on students. However, research consistently shows that students who are retained because they cannot read effectively by the end of third grade benefit considerably from retention in terms of academic achievement. There is clear evidence of negative behavioral effects from retention in older (e.g., middle-school) children, presumably due to social stigma and related issues. However, when retention happens in earlier grades the negative behavioral effects are smaller and sometimes even undetectable.

13. Senate Bill 68 banned three-cueing last year, so why are we still talking about it?

Legislation initially introduced in the 2025 legislative session would have banned three-cueing in Missouri's classrooms, but a late amendment to Senate Bill 68 only barred it from being a "primary instructional method." It should be fully banned.

14. Does the state have the authority to determine what curriculum is allowed?

Yes. Missouri can legislate curriculum for both students and teachers. This power must be exercised carefully, and we should avoid overreach, but in some cases it is necessary. The state can prevent graduates of programs that teach ineffectual reading strategies like three-cueing from being certified to teach in Missouri public schools.

15. How will this affect charter schools, private schools, and homeschools?

Charter schools are public schools, so they would be subject to the same requirements as traditional public schools. Homeschoolers and private schools would not be affected.

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Early Literacy Model Policy

Missouri has adopted a number of evidence-based reading strategies that could be modified to improve implementation. However, there also is an absence of other policies, such as a mandatory, academic-based third-grade retention program. This model policy is an example of how these deficiencies can be corrected.

*In the model policy that follows, **bold type** is used to indicate text added to a current statute, and [struck through text enclosed within brackets] indicates material that would be removed.*

The Early Literacy Expedition Act

It is the intent of the Legislature that each student's progression from the third to the fourth grade be determined, in part, by competency in reading; that district school board policies facilitate reading instruction with evidence-based teaching strategies and intervention services to address student reading needs; and that each student and his or her parent or guardian be provided objective information about that student's reading progress.

Definitions:

1. **"Three-Cueing Systems Model"** means any model of teaching students to read based on meaning, structure and syntax, and visual cues, which may also be known as "MSV".
2. **"Missouri Universal Reading Screener"** is a uniform, universal, literacy-based reading assessment given to first- to third-grade students in every public school district and charter school. The screener shall score students in one of the following categories: **"below basic," "basic," "grade-level," "proficient," and "advanced."** All associated proficiency benchmarks shall be determined by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
3. A student with a **"Reading Deficiency"** is any student who scores **"basic"** on the Missouri Universal Reading Screener; a student with a **"Substantial Reading Deficiency"** is any student who scores **"below basic."**

161.097. Evaluation of teacher education programs — advisory board established — literacy and reading instruction — rulemaking authority. —

1. The state board of education shall establish standards and procedures by which it will evaluate all teacher training institutions in this state for the approval of teacher education programs. The state board of education shall not require teacher training institutions to meet national or regional accreditation as a part of its standards and procedures in making those

evaluations, but it may accept such accreditations in lieu of such approval if standards and procedures set thereby are at least as stringent as those set by the board. The state board of education's standards and procedures for evaluating teacher training institutions shall equal or exceed those of national or regional accrediting associations.

2. There is hereby established within the department of elementary and secondary education the "Missouri Advisory Board for Educator Preparation", hereinafter referred to as "MABEP". The MABEP shall advise the state board of education and the coordinating board for higher education regarding matters of mutual interest in the area of quality educator preparation programs in Missouri. The advisory board shall include at least three active elementary or secondary classroom teachers and at least three faculty members within approved educator preparation programs. The classroom teacher members shall be selected to represent various regions of the state and districts of different sizes. The faculty representatives shall represent institutions from various regions of the state and sizes of programs. The advisory board shall hold regular meetings that allow members to share needs and concerns and plan strategies to enhance teacher preparation.

3. Upon approval by the state board of education of the teacher education program at a particular teacher training institution, any person who graduates from that program, and who meets other requirements which the state board of education shall prescribe by rule, regulation and statute shall be granted a certificate or license to teach in the public schools of this state. However, no such rule or regulation shall require that the program from which the person graduates be accredited by any national or regional accreditation association.

4. The state board of education shall, in consultation with MABEP, align literacy and reading instruction coursework for teacher education programs in early childhood, kindergarten to fifth grade elementary teacher certification, middle school communication arts, high school communication arts, and all reading and special education certificates to include the following:

(1) Teacher candidates shall receive classroom and clinical training in:

- (a) The core components of reading, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary;
- (b) Oral and written language development; and
- (c) Identification of reading deficiencies, dyslexia, and other language difficulties;

(2) Teacher candidates shall also have training on:

- (a) The selection and use of **high-quality** reading curricula and instructional materials **that do not include the three-cueing systems model**;
- (b) The administration and interpretation of assessments;

(c) How to translate assessment results into effective practice in the classroom specific to the needs of students; and

~~[(d) Additional best practices in the field of literacy instruction as recommended by the literacy advisory council pursuant to section [186.080](#).]~~

(3) Teacher preparation programs shall not include instruction in, or endorsement of, the three-cueing model of reading instruction.

5. Any rule or portion of a rule, as that term is defined in section [536.010](#), that is created under the authority delegated in this section shall become effective only if it complies with and is subject to all of the provisions of [chapter 536](#) and, if applicable, section [536.028](#). This section and [chapter 536](#) are nonseverable and if any of the powers vested with the general assembly pursuant to [chapter 536](#) to review, to delay the effective date, or to disapprove and annul a rule are subsequently held unconstitutional, then the grant of rulemaking authority and any rule proposed or adopted after August 28, 2014, shall be invalid and void.

(L. 1985 S.B. 154 § 1, A.L. 2014 S.B. 492, A.L. 2022 S.B. 681 & 662)

161.241. Reading instruction, comprehensive system of services — office of literacy — department duties — fund created, use of moneys. —

1. The state board of education, in collaboration with the coordinating board for higher education [~~and the commissioner's advisory council under section [186.080](#)~~], shall develop a plan to establish a comprehensive system of services for reading instruction.
2. The state board of education shall establish and periodically update a statewide literacy plan that supports high quality, evidence-based reading instruction for all students.
3. The state board of education shall create an office of literacy. The commissioner of education shall coordinate staff with roles relating to literacy and align staff work around supporting best practices in reading instruction.
4. The state board of education shall align literacy and reading instruction coursework for teacher education programs as required under subsection 4 of section [161.097](#).
5. Subject to appropriation, the department of elementary and secondary education shall recruit and employ quality teacher trainers with expertise in reading instruction and provide opportunities for evidence-based professional development in reading instruction available for all active teachers.
6. The department shall maintain and publish data on reading outcomes, provided that the report shall not include individually identifiable student data.

7. The department shall publish criteria and examples to help districts and schools select and use evidence-based reading curricula and instructional materials. Additionally, the department shall publish a list of curricula that ensure instruction is explicit, systematic, diagnostic, and based on phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, morphology, syntax, and semantics. This shall be a resource to districts.

8. The department shall provide online tools and training for active teachers on evidence-based reading instruction.

9. There is hereby created in the state treasury the "Evidence-based Reading Instruction Program Fund". The fund shall be administered by the department and used to reimburse school districts and charter schools for efforts to improve student literacy, including, but not limited to: initiatives that provide optional training and materials to teachers regarding best practices in reading pedagogies; resources for parents and guardians to assist them in teaching their children to read; funding for reading tutoring programs **inside or** outside of regular school hours; stipends for teachers who undergo additional training in reading instruction, which may also count toward professional development requirements; and funding for summer reading programs. The fund shall consist of moneys appropriated annually by the general assembly from general revenue to such fund, any moneys paid into the state treasury and required by law to be credited to such fund, and any gifts, bequests, or donations to such fund. The fund shall be kept separate and apart from all other moneys in the state treasury and shall be paid out by the state treasurer pursuant to [chapter 33](#). Notwithstanding the provisions of section [33.080](#) to the contrary, moneys in the fund at the end of the biennium shall not be transferred to the credit of the general revenue fund. All interest and moneys earned on the fund shall be credited to the fund.

10. Subject to appropriation, the department of elementary and secondary education shall reward each local education agency and public charter school five hundred dollars for every fourth-grade student who previously exhibited a substantial reading deficiency in K–3, or was identified as dyslexic, and subsequently scores at the proficient level or higher in reading on the annual English language arts assessment.

11. Beginning July 1, 2027, the department of elementary and secondary education shall annually review and publicly report on the compliance of approved teacher preparation programs with subsection 4 of section 161.097. The review shall include an evaluation of whether instruction is grounded in the components of evidence-based reading instruction—phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, morphology, syntax, and semantics—and an evaluation of whether prohibited practices, including three-cueing, are excluded from coursework. Programs not in compliance shall not be approved to certify new teachers.

(L. 2022 S.B. 681 & 662)

167.268. Policy for reading success plans — state board to develop guidelines. —

1. Each school district and charter school shall have on file a policy for reading success plans. Each school district and charter school shall provide all parents and guardians of students, including parents of students who are identified as having a **deficiency or** substantial deficiency in reading under subsection [†] 4 of section [167.645](#), with suggestions for regular parent-guided home reading.
2. The department of elementary and secondary education shall develop guidelines to assist districts and charter schools in formulating policies for reading success plans. Such guidelines may include, but are not limited to, measures of reading proficiency, strategies for addressing reading deficiencies, timelines for measuring pupil improvement in reading, and information on screening of dyslexia. Such guidelines may also identify performance levels for pupils identified as handicapped or severely handicapped and conditions under which such pupils may be exempt from the provisions of this section and section [167.645](#).
3. Each school district and charter school shall provide intensive reading instruction to students as provided in section [167.645](#).

(L. 1990 S.B. 740 § 5, A.L. 2022 S.B. 681 & 662)

167.340. Read to be ready program — certain students to increase average daily attendance — reading improvement instruction. —

1. The provisions of sections [167.340 to 167.346](#) shall be known and may be cited as the "Read to be Ready Program".
2. Beginning July 1, **2027** [2000], if a school district provides reading improvement instruction for students in [~~kindergarten~~] **first grade** through third grade who do not meet the [~~district's~~] **state's** objectives for reading as demonstrated by performance on the **Missouri universal reading screener** [~~district's chosen methods of reading assessment~~], such students who receive reading improvement instruction pursuant to this subsection may be counted for additional average daily attendance for state school aid during their reading improvement instruction time if such time falls outside normal school hours.

3. Reading improvement instruction may take the form of summer school, provided that the summer school instruction addresses the reading deficiency, additional hours of instruction or such other methods as the district may select including, but not limited to, smaller class sizes, additional resources including computers, reading specialists, teacher and administrator training, tutoring, phonics instruction and use of parents and volunteers.

(L. 1999 H.B. 889 § 1)

167.645. Reading assessments required, when — reading success plan required, when — intensive reading instruction required, when — notification of parents, when — retention in grade permitted, when — district duties — report. —

1. Each school district and charter school shall assess all students enrolled in ~~[kindergarten]~~ **grade one** through grade three ~~[at the beginning and end of each school year]~~ for their level of reading **on the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's universal literacy-based reading screener. Each school district and charter school will administer the Missouri universal reading screener during administration windows established by the department.** ~~[or reading readiness on state approved reading assessments. Additionally, all school districts and charter schools shall assess any newly enrolled student in grades one through five for their level of reading or reading readiness on a reading assessment from the state approved list.]~~

2. The department shall provide the Missouri universal reading screener at no cost to LEAs and public charter schools. The Missouri universal reading screener:

- (1) Must be appropriate for students in grade one through grade three (1–3); and**
- (2) May be used to comply with the dyslexia screening requirements established in section 167.950, RSMo.**

3. The results of the universal reading screeners administered to students shall not be used to assign accountability determinations for an LEA or school.

4. At the beginning of the school year, each school district and charter school shall provide a reading success plan to any student who:

- (1) Exhibits **a deficiency or** substantial deficiency in reading which creates a barrier to the child's progress **in** learning to read. The identification of a deficiency may be based upon the most recent assessments ~~[or teacher observation]~~; or
- (2) Has been identified as being at risk of dyslexia in ~~[the]~~ **a** statewide dyslexia screening or has a formal diagnosis of dyslexia.

For the purposes of this section, a **reading deficiency shall refer to a student who scores “basic” on the Missouri universal reading screener** and a substantial reading deficiency shall refer to a student who ~~[is one or more grade level or levels behind in reading or reading readiness]~~ **scores below “below basic” on the Missouri universal reading screener**; provided that nothing in this section shall be interpreted to prevent a school district or charter school from offering a reading success plan to any student based on an assessment completed **during the three administration windows** ~~[at the start and end of the school year]~~ or teacher observation. For any student entering the school district or charter school after the start of the school year, such student shall be provided a reading success plan in the event the student has been identified as having a **reading deficiency or** substantial reading deficiency, based on the student's most recent assessment ~~[or otherwise being identified through teacher observation]~~. ~~[The student's reading proficiency shall be reassessed by reading assessments on the state approved list.]~~ The student shall continue to be provided with intensive reading instruction under a reading success plan until the reading deficiency is remedied.

[2] **5.** The district or charter school shall notify the parent or guardian of any student in ~~[kindergarten]~~ **grade one** through grade three who exhibits a **reading deficiency or** substantial **reading** deficiency as described in subsection ~~[4]~~ **4** of this section, at least annually in writing, and in an appropriate, alternative manner for the parent or other guardian if necessary, of the following:

(1) That the child has been identified as having a **reading deficiency or** substantial **reading** deficiency ~~[in reading]~~;

(2) A description of the services currently provided to the child;

(3) A description of the proposed supplemental instructional services and supports that the school district will provide to the child that are designed to remediate the identified area of reading deficiency. For students identified as being at risk of dyslexia or those that have a diagnosis of dyslexia the district shall provide an explanation that the instruction that will be used to teach the child reading shall be explicit, systematic, and diagnostic and based on phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, morphology, syntax, and semantics;

(4) Strategies for parents and guardians to use in helping the child succeed in reading proficiency, including but not limited to the promotion of parent-guided home reading.

(5) That if the child has a substantial reading deficiency that is not corrected by the end of grade 3, the child will not be promoted to grade 4 unless the child qualifies for a good-cause exemption.

[3] **6.** If the school district or charter school provides a summer reading program under this section, the district or charter school shall notify the parent or guardian of each student who

exhibits a **deficiency or** substantial deficiency in reading of the opportunity to attend the summer reading program.

[4] **7. Beginning with the 2027–2028 school year**, if a student has a substantial reading deficiency at the end of third grade **as determined by the Missouri universal reading screener, the student shall be retained in grade three, unless the student scores “basic” or higher on a retest opportunity or qualifies for a good-cause exemption.** ~~[the student's parent or guardian and appropriate school staff shall discuss whether the student should be retained in grade level, based on a consideration of all relevant factors, including the reading deficiency, the student's progress in other subject areas, and the student's overall intellectual, physical, emotional, and social development. A decision to promote or retain a student with a substantial reading deficiency at the end of grade three shall be made only after direct personal consultation with the student's parent or guardian and after the formulation of a specific plan of action to remedy the student's reading deficiency.]~~

(1) A student retained under subsection 7 may be promoted to grade four if the student successfully completes a state-approved summer reading program and scores “basic” or higher on a retest opportunity of the Missouri universal reading screener.

(2) A student may be promoted to fourth grade despite scoring “below basic” on the Missouri universal reading screener if the student has a good-cause exemption. Good cause exemptions shall be limited to the following:

(a) Students with disabilities whose Individual Education Plan indicates that participation in the statewide assessment program is not appropriate, consistent with state law;

(b) Students with disabilities who participate in the statewide English Language Arts assessment and who have an Individual Education Plan or a Section 504 plan that reflects the student has received intensive reading intervention for more than 2 years but still demonstrates a substantial deficiency in reading;

(c) Students identified as English Language Learners who have had less than 2 years of instruction in an English Language Learner program;

(d) Students who have previously been retained once in grades K–3.

8. Requests to exempt students from the mandatory retention requirement using one of the good-cause exemptions as described in subsection 7 of this section shall be made consistent with the following:

(1) Documentation shall be submitted from the student’s teacher to the school principal that indicates that the promotion of the student is appropriate. Such

documentation shall consist only of the good-cause exemption being requested, and the existing reading improvement plan or Individual Education Plan, as applicable.

(2) The school principal shall review and discuss the recommendation with the teacher and make the determination as to whether the student qualifies for one of the good-cause exemptions. If the school principal determines that the student meets one of the good-cause exemptions based on the documentation provided, the school principal shall make such recommendation in writing to the district superintendent. The district superintendent shall accept or reject the school principal's recommendation in writing.

9. The school district shall assist schools with providing written notification to the parent of any student who is retained that his or her child has not met the reading level required for promotion, the reasons the child is not eligible for a good-cause exemption, and that his/her child will be retained in grade 3. The notification must include a description of the proposed interventions and supports that will be provided to the child to remedy the identified area(s) of reading deficiency in the following year.

[5] **10. Each school district or charter school shall do all of the following:**

(1) Provide students who are identified as having a **deficiency or** substantial deficiency in reading under subsection **4** of this section, have been identified as being at risk of dyslexia in the statewide dyslexia screening, or have a formal diagnosis of dyslexia with intensive instructional services and supports specified in a reading success plan, as appropriate according to student need, free of charge, to remediate the identified areas of reading deficiency, including additional scientific, evidence-based reading instruction and other strategies prescribed by the school district or charter school which may include but are not limited to the following:

- (a) Small group or individual instruction;
- (b) Reduced teacher-student ratios;
- (c) More frequent progress monitoring;
- (d) Tutoring or mentoring;
- (e) Extended school day, week, or year; and
- (f) Summer reading programs;

(2) For any student with a formal diagnosis of dyslexia or for a student who was found to be at risk of dyslexia in the statewide dyslexia screening, the school district or charter school shall provide evidence-based reading instruction that addresses phonology, sound-symbol association, syllable instruction, morphology, syntax, and semantics provided through systematic, cumulative, explicit, and diagnostic methods;

(3) At regular intervals, but no less than four times per year in a manner that reflects progress through each school term, notify the parent or guardian of academic and other progress being made by the student and give the parent or guardian other useful information;

(4) In addition to required reading enhancement and acceleration strategies, provide all parents of students, including parents of students who are identified as having a **deficiency or** substantial deficiency in reading under subsection ~~4~~ **4** of this section, with a plan that includes suggestions for regular parent-guided home reading.

[6] **11.** Each school district and charter school shall ensure that intensive reading instruction through a reading development initiative shall be provided to each [~~kindergarten~~] **grade one** through grade **three** [~~five~~] student who is assessed as exhibiting a **deficiency or** substantial deficiency in reading. In addition to the requirements otherwise provided, such instruction shall also comply with all of the following criteria:

(1) Be provided to all **grade one** [~~kindergarten~~] through grade **three** [~~five~~] students who exhibit a **deficiency or** substantial deficiency in reading under this section. The assessments shall measure phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension;

(2) Be provided during regular school hours;

(3) Provide a reading curriculum that meets the requirements of section [170.014](#), and at a minimum has the following specifications:

(a) Assists students assessed as exhibiting a **deficiency or** substantial deficiency in reading to develop the skills to read at grade level;

(b) Provides skill development in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension;

(c) Includes a scientifically based and reliable assessment;

(d) Does not include the three-cueing system to teach word reading;

(e) Provides initial and ongoing analysis of each student's reading progress; and

(f) Provides a curriculum in core academic subjects to assist the student in maintaining or meeting proficiency levels for the appropriate grade in all academic subjects.

[7] **12.** School districts and charter schools shall report to the department the specific intensive reading interventions and supports implemented by the school district or charter school pursuant to this section as well as the reading assessment data collected for grades

[~~kindergarten~~] **one** through **three** [~~five~~]. The department shall annually prescribe the components of required or requested reports.

[8] **13.** (1) Each school district and charter school shall address reading proficiency as part of its comprehensive school improvement plan, drawing upon information about children from assessments conducted pursuant to subsection 1 of this section and the prevalence of deficiencies identified by classroom, elementary school, and other student characteristics. As part of its comprehensive school improvement plan or contract, each school district or charter school shall review chronic early elementary absenteeism for its impact on literacy development. If more than fifteen percent of an attendance center's students are not at grade level in reading by the end of third grade, the comprehensive school improvement plan or contract shall include strategies to reduce that percentage, including school and community strategies to raise the percentage of students who are proficient in reading.

(2) Each school district and charter school shall provide professional development services to enhance the skills of elementary teachers in responding to children's unique reading issues and needs and to increase the use of evidence-based strategies.

14. Each district school board must annually report in writing to the Department of Education by October 1 of each year the following information on the prior school year:

(1) The district school board's policies and procedures on student retention and promotion.

(2) By grade, the number and percentage of all students in grades K–3 with deficiencies and substantial deficiencies in reading.

(3) By grade, the number and percentage of all students retained in grades K–3.

(4) The total number and percentage of students in grade 3 who were promoted for good cause, by each category of good cause as specified in subsection (4).

(L. 1999 H.B. 889 § 9, A.L. 2001 S.B. 319, A.L. 2022 S.B. 681 & 662)

Effective 1-01-23

170.014. Reading instruction act — reading programs established, essential components. —

1. This section shall be known as the "Reading Instruction Act" and is enacted to ensure that all public schools including charter schools establish reading programs in kindergarten through grade five based in scientific research. "Evidence-based reading instruction" includes practices that have been proven effective through evaluation of the outcomes for large numbers of students and are highly likely to be effective in improving reading if

implemented with fidelity. Such programs shall include the essential components of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, and all new teachers who teach reading in kindergarten through grade three shall receive adequate training in these areas.

2. (1) For purposes of this subsection, "three-cueing system" means any model of teaching students to read based on meaning, structure and syntax, and visual cues, which may also be known as "MSV".

(2) A public school district or charter school shall provide reading instruction in accordance with the following requirements:

(a) Phonics instruction for decoding and encoding shall be the primary instructional strategy for teaching word reading;

(b) Instruction in word reading shall not **use the three-cueing system to teach word reading in any form.** [~~rely primarily on strategies based on the three-cueing system model of reading or visual memory; and~~]

~~[(c) Reading instruction may include visual information and strategies that improve background and experiential knowledge, add context, and increase oral language and vocabulary to support comprehension, but such visual information and strategies shall not be used to teach word reading.]~~

3. Every public school in the state shall offer a reading program as described in subsection 1 of this section for kindergarten through grade five.

(L. 2002 H.B. 1711, A.L. 2022 S.B. 681 & 662, A.L. 2025 S.B. 68)

Severability clause, see § [82.293](#).

~~[186.080. Council established—members, meetings, duties, recommendations.—~~

~~1. The commissioner of education shall establish a literacy advisory council. The council shall consist of no more than twenty members, appointed by the commissioner, and shall include members representing the following stakeholder groups:~~

~~(1) School boards;~~

~~(2) Charter schools;~~

~~(3) School superintendents;~~

~~(4) Elementary and secondary building principals;~~

- ~~(5) At least three teachers, including at least two teachers with expertise in reading instruction;~~
- ~~(6) At least two special education educators;~~
- ~~(7) At least two parents of elementary and secondary school age pupils who have struggled with literacy proficiency;~~
- ~~(8) At least two community members who have struggled with literacy proficiency or supported others who have struggled with literacy proficiency, at least one of whom shall be a high school student;~~
- ~~(9) One member from a^{*} dyslexia advocacy group;~~
- ~~(10) Faculty members of institutions of higher education with approved teacher preparation programs;~~
- ~~(11) Professionals with expertise in reading instruction, reading interventions, and how students learn to read including one certified academic language therapist; and~~
- ~~(12) Professionals with expertise in educational assessment data analysis.~~

~~2. The council shall meet at least twice per year to review best practices in literacy instruction and related policy provisions. The department shall provide necessary staff and resources for the work of the advisory council.~~

~~3. The council shall periodically provide recommendations to the commissioner and the state board of education regarding any identified improvements to literacy instruction and policy for students. The recommendations may include recommendations for changes to state law, and the commissioner shall furnish any such recommendations to the joint committee on education.~~

~~4. The council recommendations shall:~~

- ~~(1) Advise the department of elementary and secondary education on how to implement and maintain the statewide literacy plan required under section [161.241](#) and advise the department, school districts, and charter schools on ways to inform and engage parents and other community members about the literacy plan;~~
- ~~(2) Provide advice as to what services the department should provide to school districts and charter schools to support implementation of the plan and on staffing levels and resources needed at the department to support the statewide effort to improve literacy;~~
- ~~(3) Provide advice regarding the statewide plan for collecting literacy related data that informs:
 - ~~(a) Literacy instructional practices;~~~~

- ~~(b) Teacher professional development in the field of literacy;~~
- ~~(c) What proficiencies and skills should be measured through literacy assessments and how those assessments are incorporated into local assessment plans; and~~
- ~~(d) How to identify school progress in achieving literacy outcomes, including closing literacy gaps for students from historically underserved populations;~~
- ~~(4) Recommend best practices for tiered literacy instruction within a multitiered system of supports to best improve and sustain literacy proficiency;~~
- ~~(5) Review literacy assessments and outcomes and provide ongoing advice as to how to continuously improve those outcomes and sustain improvement; and~~
- ~~(6) Provide a means for members of the public to provide input and ask questions concerning literacy issues.~~

~~(L. 2022 S.B. 681 & 662)~~

~~*Word "a" does not appear in original rolls.]~~



POLICY BRIEF

AUGUST 2025

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AN EXPEDITION TO IMPROVE STUDENT READING

Exploring Third-Grade Retention and Early Literacy Policies in Missouri

By Avery Frank

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

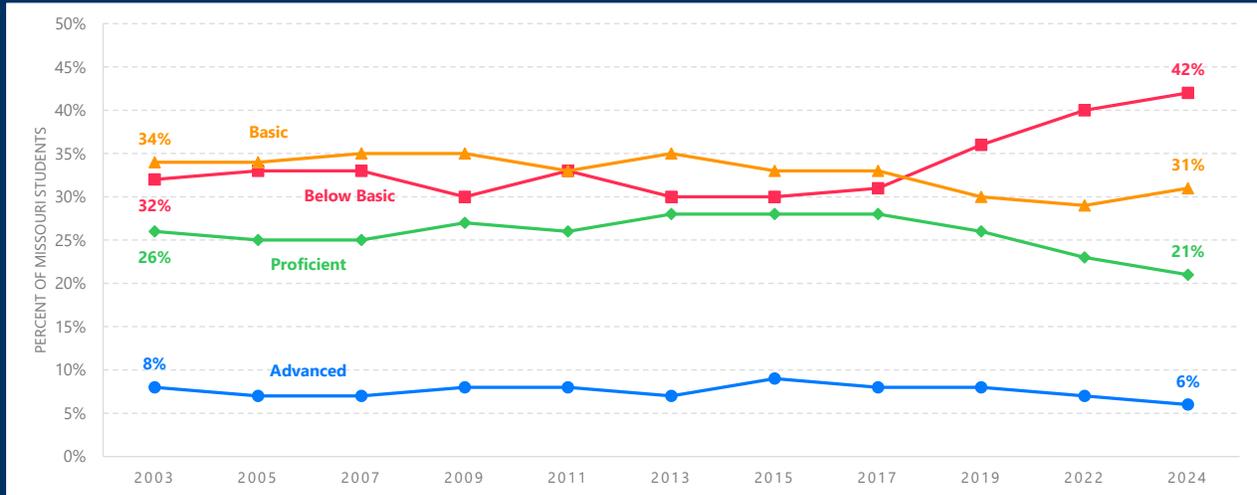
These results are not outliers. The patterns seen in the NAEP data are also broadly reflected in state testing data from the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP; see Figure 3).⁴ State assessment data starting from the 2017–18 school year are used because it is the first year of the latest state-designed 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.

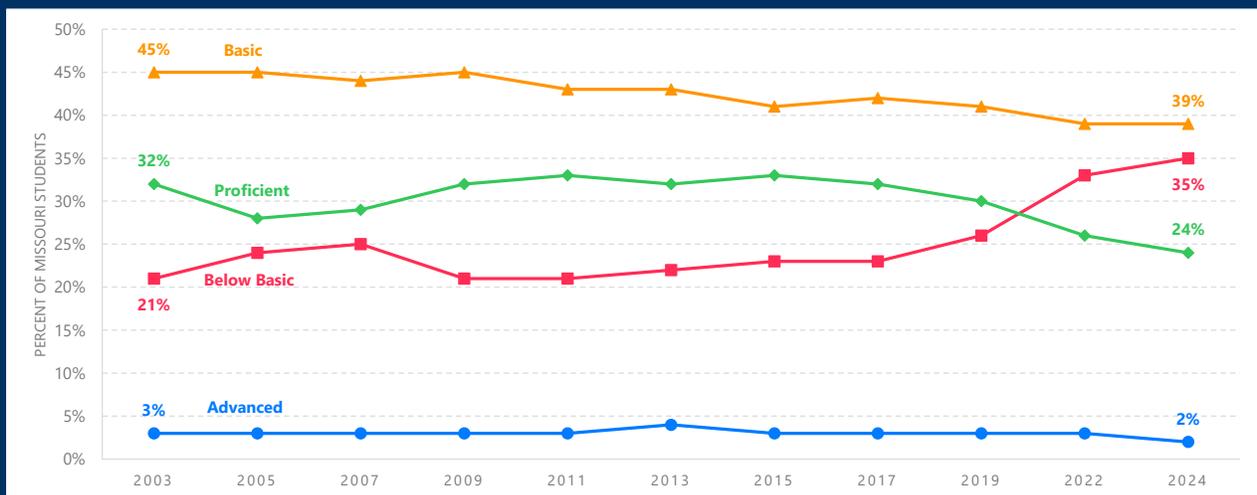


Source: *The Nation’s Report Card, State Profiles.*

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.

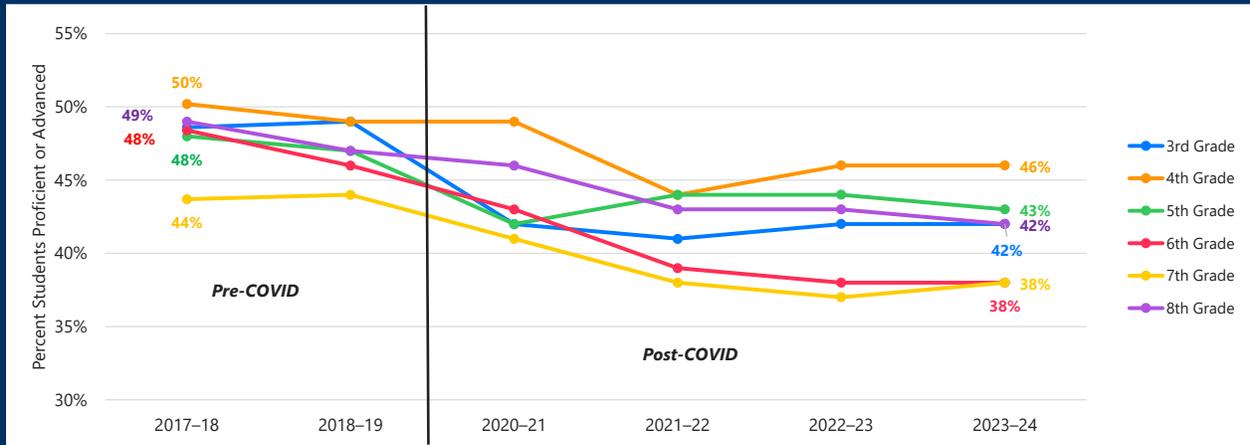


Source: *The Nation’s Report Card, State Profiles.*

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.

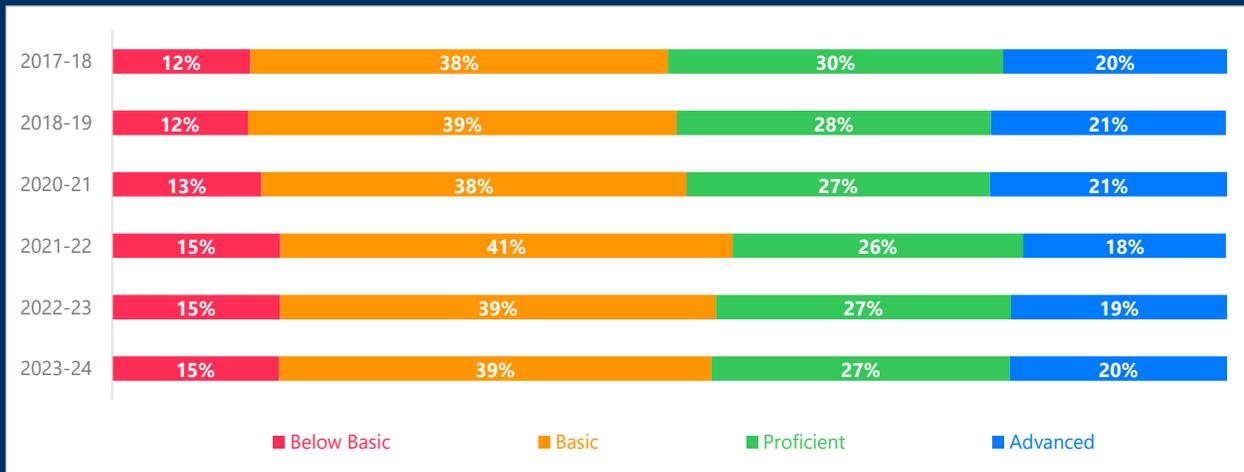
Putting such reforms in place will require alignment among state agencies, teacher preparation programs, K–12 schools, state assessment systems, and accountability frameworks. With an agreed-upon destination and a plan for getting there, Missouri can make students stronger readers and become a model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

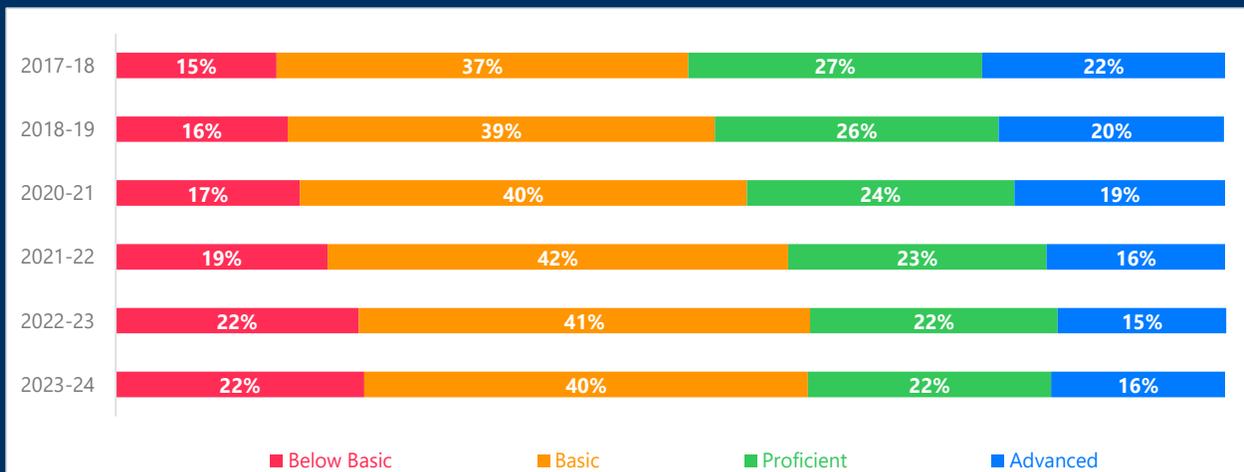


Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

Figure B

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

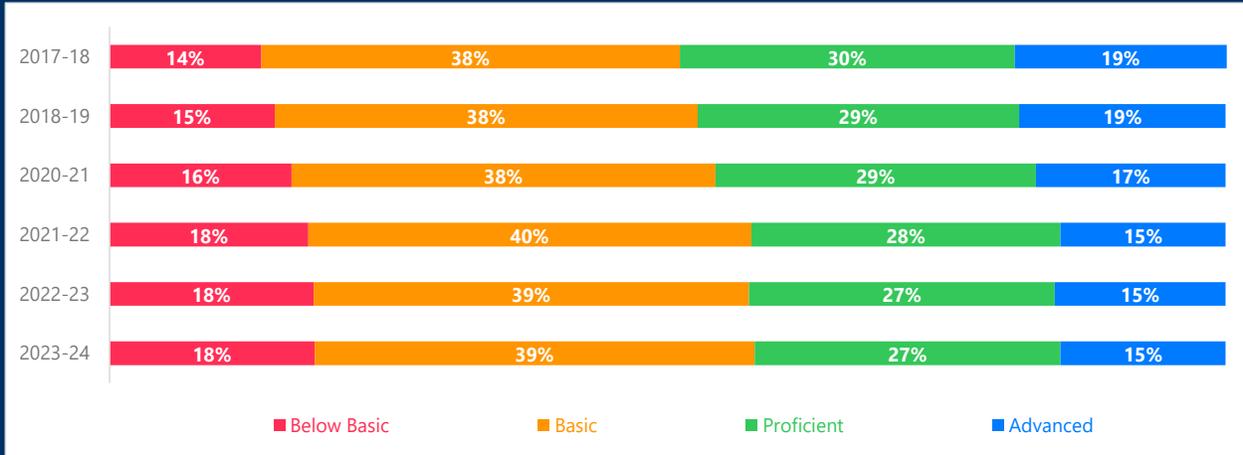
Missouri’s sixth graders have seen a more significant decrease in scores, with seven percent more students scoring in the “Below Basic” category.



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.

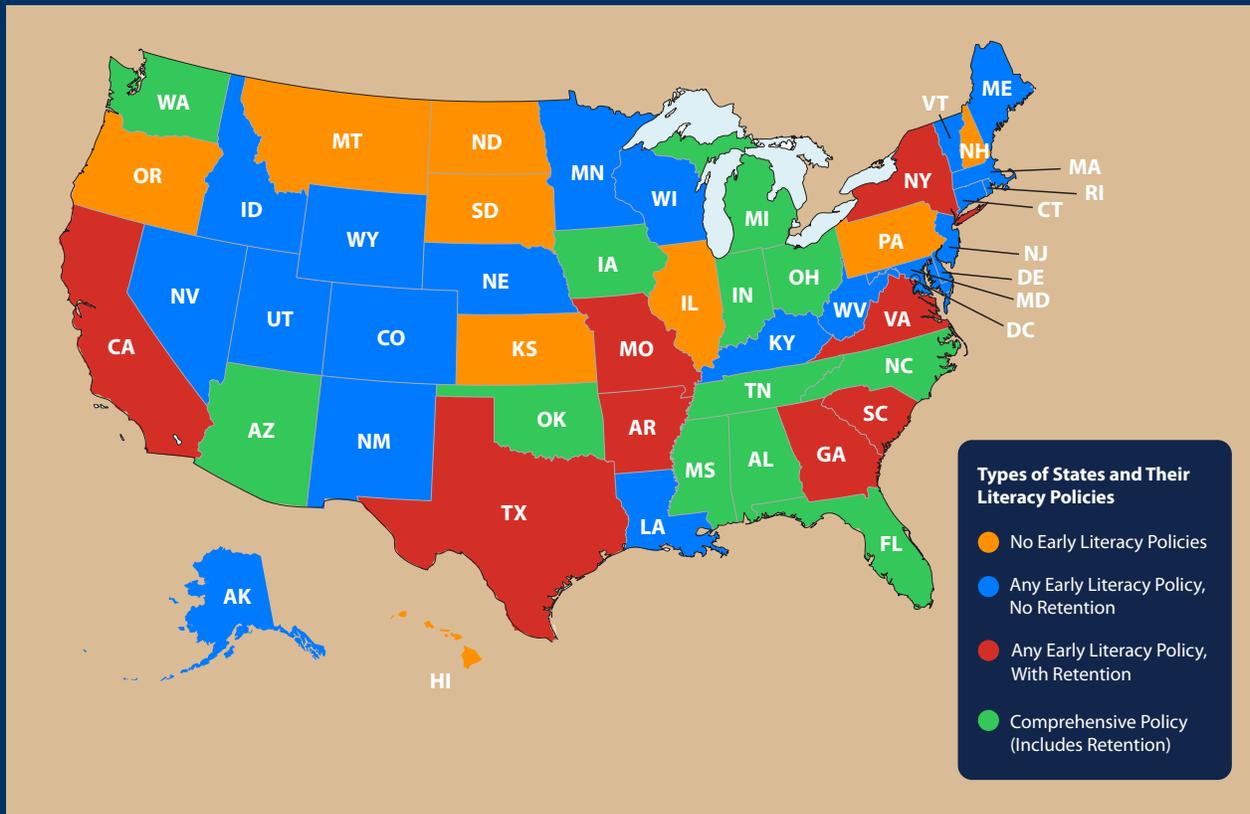


Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

Figure D

Early Literacy Map Used for Westall and Cummings’ (2023) Study, Based on ExcelinEd’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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