



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?

Missouri should adopt these key reforms:

- 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.

**Talk to a
Policy Expert**

Cory Koedel

Director of Education Policy

cory.koedel@showmeinstitute.org

Avery Frank

Policy Analyst

avery.frank@showmeinstitute.org

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