



UpswingLabs

Dynamic Districts & States: Where and How Literacy Is Improving (2025)

By David Scarlett Wakelyn

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About the Author

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About Upswing Labs

Upswing Labs works with states, school districts, and public charter schools to improve literacy achievement.

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Executive Summary (TL; DR)

Early literacy achievement in America has remained stagnant since the pandemic, with fourth grade reading scores half a grade level below 2019 levels. While the average for third grade reading proficiency has grown less than 1% over the last three years, and hovers at 44.7% across states, a select group of education systems are defying this trend:

- *Four states—Mississippi, Louisiana, West Virginia, and South Carolina—and 260 school districts have increased third-grade proficiency rates by 3-4% annually for three consecutive years.*
- *The successful districts span diverse settings - urban centers like New Orleans and Cincinnati, suburban districts like Elgin U-46, and a surprising number of rural communities.*

Initial conversations with leaders three dynamic districts (Marietta City, Allegany County, and DC Prep) reveal several common practices:

- *Implementation of intensive, multi-year professional development focused on evidence-based reading practices.*
- *Expansion and restructuring of time dedicated to literacy instruction*
- *Strategic staffing changes to support literacy growth*
- *Adoption of high-quality curricula (in Allegany & Marietta City) that integrate grade-level reading and writing*
- *Careful selection of assessments to identify student needs and track progress*

Superintendents and instructional leaders looking to accelerate literacy improvement should consider three actions:

1. Learn systematically from dynamic districts through detailed case studies
2. Set meaningful literacy goals aligned to workforce needs (70-72% proficiency by 2031-32)
3. Join a network of districts committed to ambitious but achievable improvement. We aim to support districts working their way through similar challenges & obstacles as they grow literacy achievement.

Exciting improvements are happening all around us in sectors such as aerospace and biomedicine. Education can see the same progress in literacy if we learn from the dynamic states and districts.

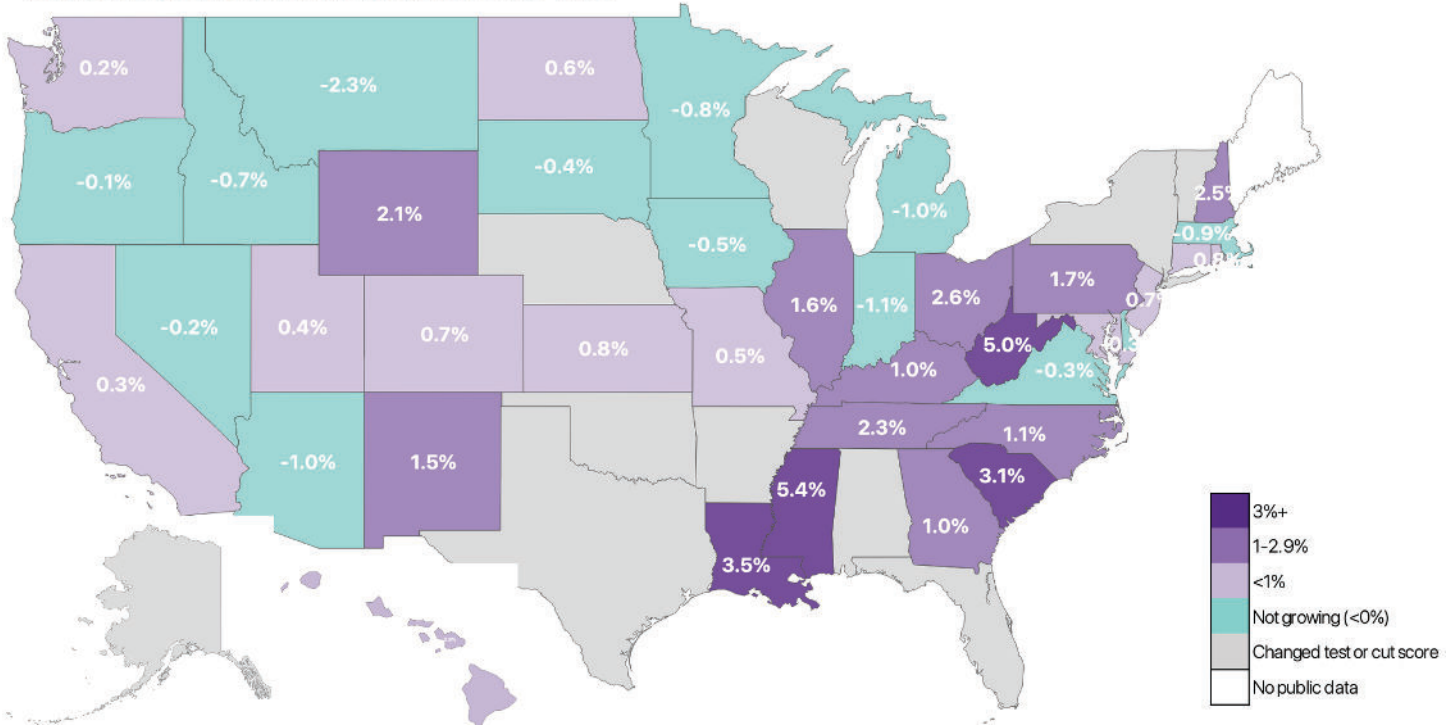
Introduction

A dismal picture of learning recovery emerged with the recent release of the 2024 Nation’s Report Card. Fourth grade reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are half a grade level below where they were in 2019. Only one state, Louisiana, has students reading significantly better than before the pandemic.

The federal data confirms what we’ve also seen in state test results: early reading achievement has been stagnant since the pandemic ended. Over the last three years,

third grade reading scores have grown on average less than one percent. In 2022, the average third grade reading proficiency was 44.3%. In 2024, it was 44.7%. However, four states and 260 school districts stand out as getting more students off to a better start, growing third-grade proficiency rates by 3-4% annually for the last three years. The four successful states are also some of the least advantaged in the nation. Mississippi and Louisiana rank first and second in the United States in child poverty, while the other two—West Virginia and South Carolina—are in the top ten.

MAP 1
States Where 3rd Grade Reading is Rising & Where It's Not
Average annual growth in proficiency, 2022-2024



This report—first in an annual series-- locates the dynamic districts and states, suggests a path for how we might rigorously learn from what they are doing well, and makes a case for how school leaders should think about setting goals for reading achievement in the future. The full list of districts is visible in the appendix.

Successful States

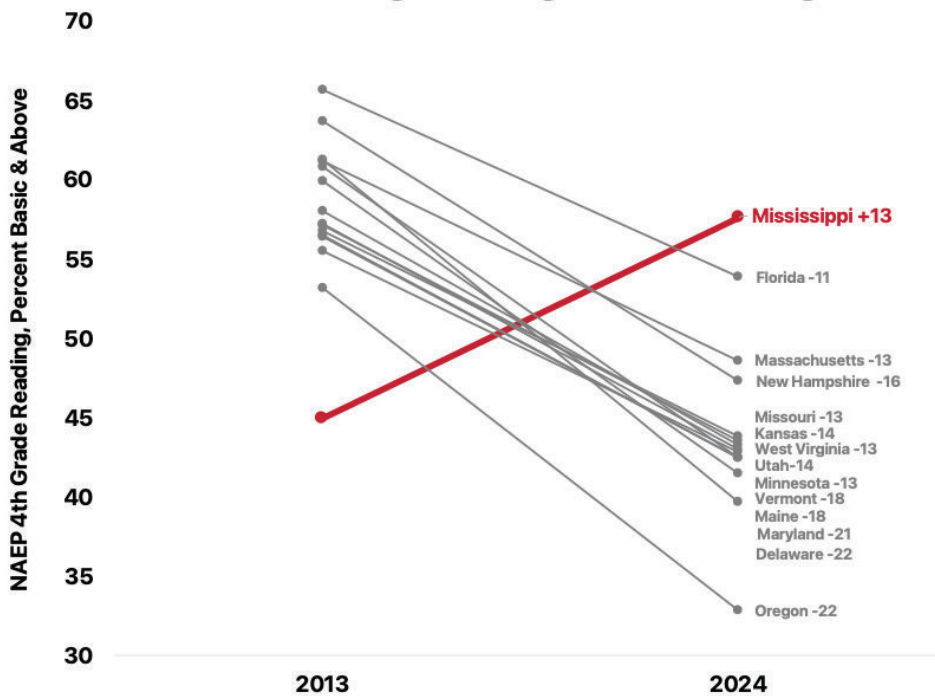
Mississippi's steady progress since enacting comprehensive state legislation in 2013 has been well documented.¹ The 2024 NAEP data shows that over the last decade, Mississippi is the only state with a double digit increase in the percentage of fourth grade students from low-income families reading at NAEP Basic and Above.

Along the way, Mississippi's policy has encountered its share of critics and skeptics. State leaders and have refuted the claim that their literacy gains are a result of retaining students in third grade.²

The state has also chosen to focus solely on proficiency levels, a practice many testing experts discourage. But at the same time, the state's accountability system includes a score for how much growth made by the students who start in the bottom quartile of reading results. Mississippi's data in Figure 2 shows improvement in achievement at all five performance levels. A rising tide is lifting all boats.

FIGURE 1

States with Double Digit Changes in Teaching Kids from Poor Families to Read

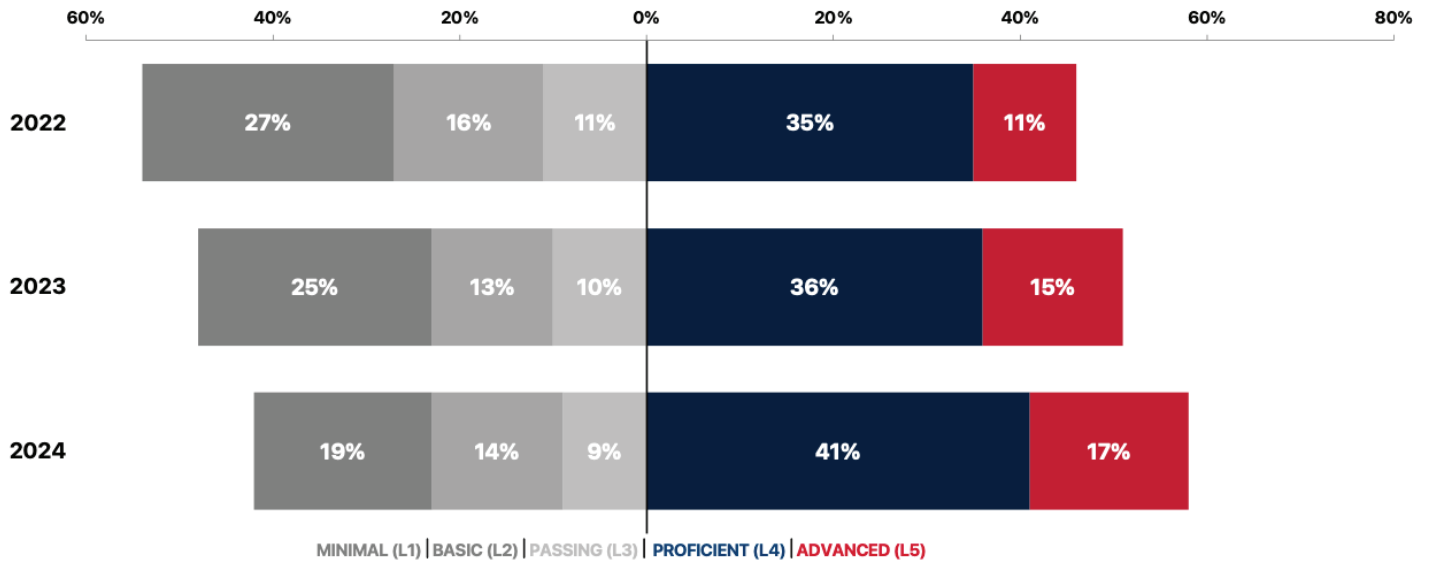


Note: According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), "economically disadvantaged" is defined as a student who is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).
Data Source: The Nation's Report Card, NAEP Data Explorer

FIGURE 2

Improvement at All Levels in Mississippi

More 3rd graders becoming better readers each year; 5,800 students are newly proficient.



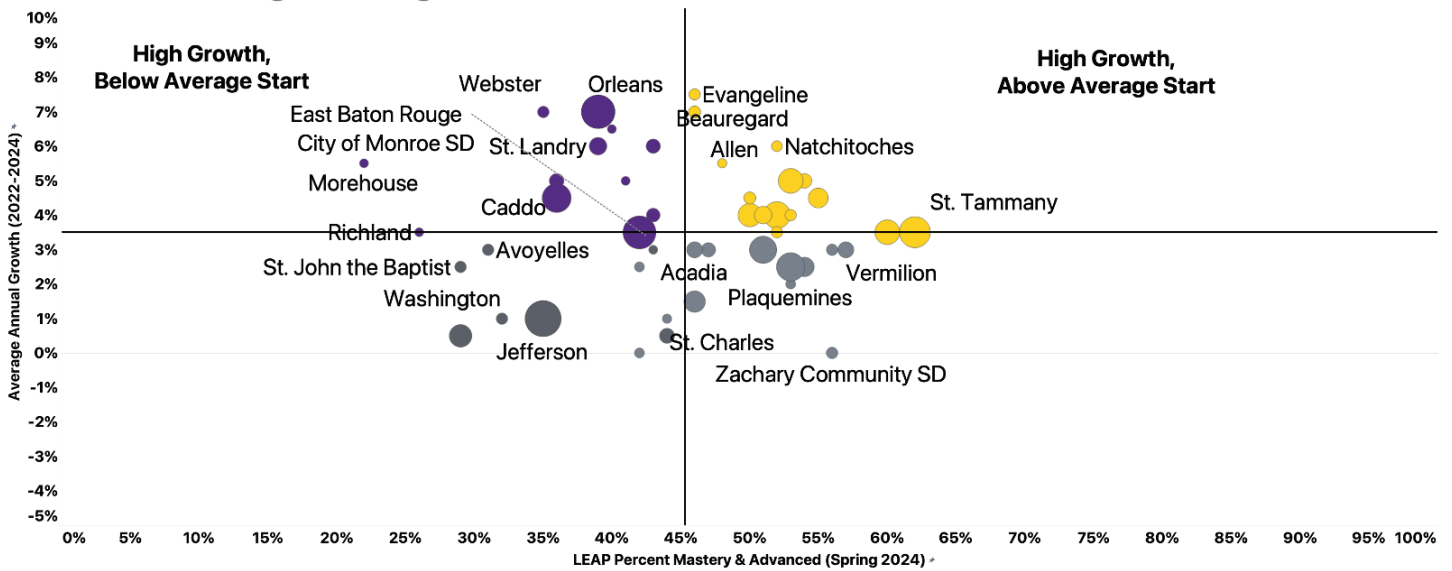
Data Source: Mississippi Department of Education
<https://www.mdek12.org/OPR/Reporting/Assessment/2023-24>

Two implementation features are worth calling out. First, Mississippi’s leaders, from governors to district superintendents, have articulated a common mission to improve reading achievement. In 2013, Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant set a reading improvement goal for the state. His successor, Tate Reeves, continues to discuss early reading scores in his annual state of the state speech. Few governors do this in any year. Mississippi’s leaders have done it for a decade.

Second, the state hired reading coaches to work in the 75 lowest performing schools, but it kept a strong hand on ensuring quality. In the first year, the state only placed 24 coaches they knew were fully qualified to step into the role, even though 600 applied for the job. Once the state had people fully ready for the job, it eventually expanded coaches into 86 schools. The coaches are assigned to classrooms to work with teachers a few days a week for the entire school year, building relationships with instructors and providing consistent job-embedded learning.

Louisiana’s dynamic districts include a mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas. As shown in Figure 3, this includes the state’s second and third-largest districts, Orleans and East Baton Rouge Parishes. Unlike Mississippi, Louisiana did not begin its efforts by passing wide-ranging laws to support the science of reading. But it has made considerable efforts to ensure the adoption and use of high-quality curriculum.

FIGURE 3
Dynamic Districts in Louisiana
 Sixteen see average annual growth of 3-4% since 2022



Data Source: Louisiana Department of Education
<https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/>

In his book *Beyond Standards*, USC Professor Morgan Polikoff highlights Louisiana as a model of deep commitment to using high-quality curriculum. The state has rated six ELA curricula as Tier I (the best) on a three tier scales. Ratings are accompanied by annotated rubrics that explain the reason for each score. The state supports purchasing of the Tier 1 materials through statewide contracts, making it cheaper and easier for districts to purchase them.³

Louisiana has also built its own curriculum, the Louisiana Guidebooks, which are free to districts. They are the most-used materials in the state and twice have been revised and improved based on implementation feedback. In addition, the state has done much to encourage districts to adopt the Hochman Writing Method and incorporated sentence writing activities into the Guidebooks curriculum.⁴ Finally, the state provides a list of vendors who offer extended professional development to support curriculum implementation.

An Initial Look At Dynamic Districts

We’ve had initial conversations with three of the dynamic districts in this report: Marietta City in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, Allegany County, at the edge of the Appalachian Mountains in Maryland, and DC Prep, a K-8 public charter school network. The top line practices all three have in common is that they were deeply dissatisfied with their current performance, diagnosed their internal challenges, and over several years began implementing a coherent set of responses to them.

In essence, leaders in all three districts asked, “What’s our most important problem and how do we solve it?” The answer they landed on is that most teachers don’t have a deep enough grasp of all the elements of evidence-based reading instruction.

FIGURE 4

Three Dynamic Districts

School District	Locale	Meeting & Exceeding Standards			Average Annual	Number Tested	Poverty Rate (%)	Students of Color (%)
		2022	2023	2024	Change	(2024)		
Marietta City (GA)	Small City	35.6	48.4	44.8	4.6	685	17	73
Allegany County (MD)	Small City	41.3	48.3	51.0	4.9	537	21	6
DC Prep	Large City	14.0	18.0	21.0	3.5	208	25	96

After analyzing their test results, all three districts embarked on deep, extended professional learning for all elementary teachers. Marietta City engaged in a two-year effort to train teachers with Top Ten Tools, followed by a year-long engagement to train teachers with Writing Revolution.⁵ In 2020, Allegany County began a two-year engagement with LETRS to improve elementary teachers’ foundational knowledge and skills. Dr. Carol Tolman, co-founder of LETRS, delivered some of this training herself. State funding allowed Allegany County to transition using TNTP’s course, the Science of Reading. DC Prep has all teachers spend two weeks in the summer learning about literacy and professional development days each quarter.

All three districts have both reconfigured and expanded the amount of time available for literacy instruction. DC Prep added an extra 15 minutes, now teaching literacy in a 1:45 block, with push-in support for struggling students. Allegany went from an hour and a half to two hours and added an extra 30 minutes for small group interventions and enrichment. As part of its regular literacy block, Marietta reconfigured its literacy schedule to include a 90-minute whole class block that integrates science and social studies with their Tier 1 literacy curriculum, plus a 20–30-minute phonics/morphology block, plus 30-60-minutes of small group instruction, for a total of 140-180 minutes dedicated each day to early literacy.

Closely related to these efforts, the districts realized they needed to change how they staff schools to support literacy growth.

Marietta hired reading specialists to do the pullouts, with a staff of 38 across 8 schools and now reduced to 25 as students improved. They also created a new role, a Science of Reading Facilitator, each of whom works with two schools. Allegany redefined the role of its literacy coaches to provide teachers with more direct feedback about how to improve their instruction. DC Prep redefined the job of its assistant principals to serve primarily as instructional coaches, who lead collaborative planning meetings and provide teachers feedback on their instruction.

Both Marietta City and Allegany County realized they needed to improve the quality of their K-5 language arts curricula. Marietta City dropped the leveled readers approach suggested in Guided Reading and switched to Wit and Wisdom and a skills-based foundational class. Allegany stopped using Treasures and has evolved to using Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA).

DC Prep stopped using leveled readers and shifted to using decodable, controlled texts. They use a homegrown curriculum emphasizing novel study, but they are exploring how a change might help provide more structure to the way they currently teach students to write. All three districts deeply integrate on-grade level reading and writing in their whole-class blocks.

The districts have also given careful thought to which assessments they give to students and how schools use the results. Both DC Prep and Allegany added a DIBELS screener three times a year to gauge student progress and identify students who need extra support.

Leaders in all three districts asked a simple but profound question: ‘What’s our most important problem, and how do we solve it?’



DC Prep layers in biweekly progress monitoring as well. Marietta City does the same for students in their skill-based foundational groups. And with support from the [Cox Campus](#), Marietta City added an Informal Decoding Inventory as well as a quick assessment of oral reading fluency (ORF).

In their analyses of data though, these districts were clear that not every problem was a phonics problem. At DC Prep, their interim assessment data showed that some of their small groups were overdoing it on foundational skills practice and that they needed more instruction in close reading. In Allegany, the DIBELS data showed that students were reading

accurately but pointed to a need to work more carefully on students' fluency.

Finally, the districts receive expert advice from external partners. In the case of Marietta City, the Cox Campus continues to offer the district's new teachers online literacy modules. A partnership with the [University of Georgia](#) also helps them to see how well teachers are implementing what they've learned in professional development. Allegany partners with [TNTP](#) for monthly implementation support. DC Prep is planning on partnering with an outside organization to continue to build capacity for leaders on literacy instruction.

Recommendations On What To Do Next

1. Learn More Thoroughly from Dynamic Districts

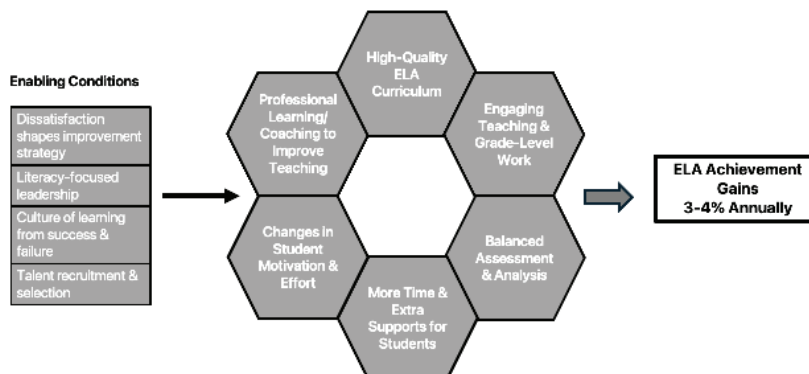
Some may wonder, "Don't we already know what to do to improve?" Yes, there's a deep tradition of Effective Schools research that started with Ron Edmonds in the late 1970s, continued into this century by Tony Bryk and colleagues at the UChicago Consortium on School Research, with their book [Organizing Schools for Improvement](#).

While there's a coalescing of findings in this research—schools need organizational practices such as strong leadership and an orderly climate—this is too generic. What superintendents and instructional leaders need now are recommendations precisely matched to what it takes to raise literacy achievement.

We envision researching and writing detailed case studies of dynamic schools and districts in the late spring and summer of 2025. Our inquiry will be guided by the hypotheses in the framework in Figure 5 below. Understanding how successful organizations improve performance can provide needed evidence for those that are struggling. It can generate useful evidence on implementation lessons, how to deal with setbacks, and how to navigate around obstacles as they emerge.

FIGURE 5

What's Necessary for Improved Literacy Achievement? An Initial Hypothesis:



These case studies at first would be descriptive. In winter of 2025-2026, we envision adding quantitative studies to test the degree to which the initial findings are statistically associated with improvement. This allows us to remedy a shortcoming of case studies in the field.⁶ Previous efforts have looked exclusively at positive outliers but never compare them to a group of similarly matched districts that are stuck.

Superintendents and instructional leaders also need implementation guidance on connecting what to do with how to do it. We recently heard a chief academic officer of a medium-sized district discuss their multiyear effort to improve literacy. District leaders were greatly influenced by listening to the *Sold a Story* podcast and began professional learning in evidence-based reading practices, first for principals in the Spring of 2023 and then for teachers in the summer. They have adopted a high-quality, knowledge building curriculum. They have required that all students receive Tier 1 instruction and restructured their intervention resources at both elementary and middle schools. With all these efforts over the last two years, they've only grown ELA achievement by 1% a year.

Most instructional leaders are going to know what they need to do. They might start with a high-quality curriculum, paired with professional learning, that helps teachers improve their knowledge and skills around evidence-based reading. But to train all a district's teachers in a sequence such as LETRS is an enormous, multiyear undertaking whose success or failure depends on several small, cumulative factors. An advantage of the case studies is they will offer implementation advice on how to enact changes in each component that shapes student achievement.

District leaders, principals, and literacy coaches are also going to need guidance that's specific to their improvement trajectory. That is, the smart practices implemented to move a district from 30 to 40% of students reading at grade level are likely to differ from the practices needed to get from 40 to 50%, 50 to 60%, and so on.

In addition, districts need guidance tailored to their demographics and size. For districts with high percentages of English learners, we're currently blind on what they're doing to be successful. On the list of dynamic districts are an interesting mix of urban schools: New Orleans, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There are also several large suburban districts, such as Elgin U-46, a suburb of Chicago, and DeSoto County Mississippi, a suburb of Memphis.

There are also more rural districts on the list than one would expect. Nationally, a quarter of students are in rural districts, but here, they represent one-third of all students in the dynamic districts.

The rural districts are not demographically uniform but fall into three types. Forty-one of them are ethnically diverse, with high concentrations of African American and Hispanic students. Some of these—like Baldwin County, Georgia or Lowndes County, Mississippi are in the Black Belt of the American South. Others, like Alice ISD, Texas or Sanger Unified, California, are border towns or agricultural centers.

Another 22 rural districts have high concentrations of evangelical churchgoers who are mostly Southern Baptists. These districts, like Pike County, Kentucky and Pulaski County, West Virginia are also politically conservative, with 75-80% voting for Republicans in the last three elections. Twenty-five of the rural dynamic districts are in solidly working-class counties. They don't rely on agriculture but exist as small service economies with some small manufacturing. The rural districts need guidance that recognizes factors distinctive in their setting.

In his new book *Reset*, Dan Heath spends a chapter looking at outliers in a variety of industries. "By studying bright spots, we can identify the circumstances that allow us to succeed," he writes. "And if we can understand these circumstances, we can replicate them, allowing our success to spread."⁷

2. Set Meaningful & Difficult, But Achievable Goals

One superintendent in a large California district was upset at not being on the dynamic districts list and protested, “But we’re above the state average.” Another state leader proudly pointed out that their ranking among states has moved from 42nd to 14th.

Our field lacks clarity on its goals. We don’t have a clear direction of where we should be headed. What should be the ultimate destination? What are the right markers of achievement progress? How good is good enough?

Edwin Locke and Gary Latham are two scholars who’ve spent nearly 50 years studying goal setting. In the [most comprehensive summary of their research](#), they advise organizations to set goals that are meaningful and difficult, but achievable.⁸

Locke and Latham find that individuals are more likely to commit to goals they see as meaningful or important. They also find that performance is considerably higher when striving for harder rather than easier goals. It’s also crucial the goals are seen as achievable. If employees believe the goals set for them are unreachable, Locke and Latham warn that the entire organization can easily become demoralized and stop trying.

One meaningful goal for school leaders and teachers would be to **ensure that the number of proficient readers matches the number of people who need to be college and career ready in the next decade.**

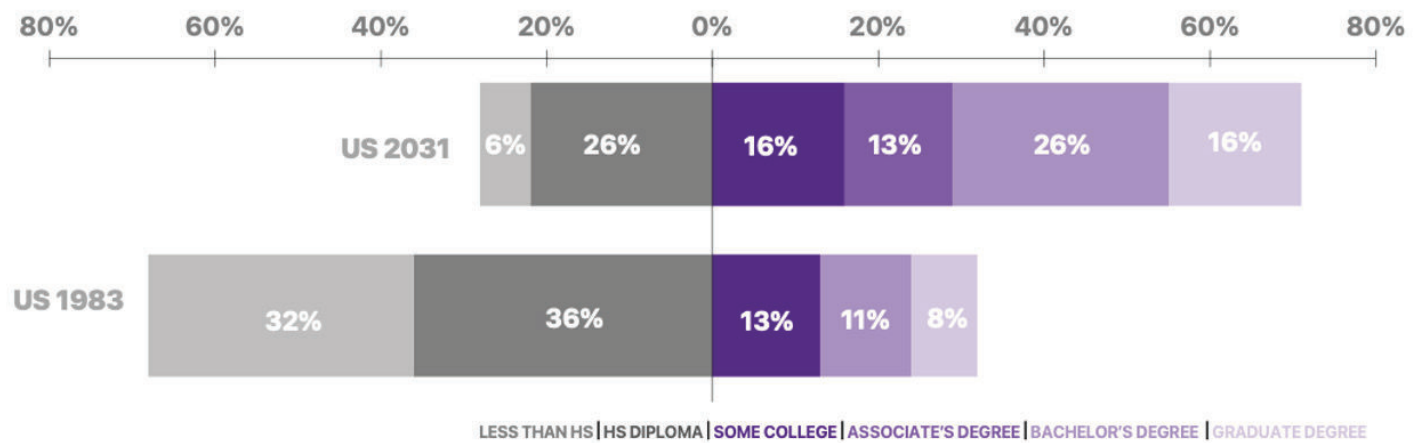
In their report *After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements*, [economists at Georgetown University](#) project that by 2031, 72% of jobs in the United States will require at least some college, while 55% will seek applicants with an associate degree or more. This is the reverse of the educational requirements of 40 years ago, when 70% of jobs required a high school diploma or less.⁹

At this moment, policymakers in both parties have expressed doubt about the value of a college degree. But the Georgetown analysis is clear: our workforce continues to upskill rapidly. Postsecondary education—including certificates and industry-recognized credentials—is the only pathway to middle-class jobs and earnings.

FIGURE 6

Seventy-Two Percent of Future Jobs Will Require Some College+

55% Will Require at Least an Associate’s Degree; Only 28% to Workers with a High School Diploma or Less



Data Source: *After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education and Training Requirements through 2031*. Georgetown University Center on Education & Work (<https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/projections2031/>)

Students and their families sense this too. Ninety-four percent of students [surveyed by TNTP in its study on opportunity](#) expressed a desire to go to college. Seventy percent of high schoolers have career goals that require at least a college degree. Sixty-two percent of those who most recently completed high school [went on to college](#) nine months later.

It's worth repeating: we recommend that a state or district's literacy goals align to the proportion of students who need to be prepared to succeed in college and careers. A few states, Maryland and Utah, have done this, setting 70% as their goal for literacy, but with a shorter timeline than 2031. But for most, finding the meaningful sweet spot has been elusive.

Why not set a goal of 100%? Isn't it OK to be "hairy and audacious", to aim high, even if districts miss?

American school leaders have a long track record of aiming extremely high and failing to come close to the target. The Goals 2000 Act aspired for the U.S. to become first in the world in math and science. A decade later, our ranking on international math assessments had grown worse compared to other countries.¹⁰

No Child Left Behind famously asked schools to get 100% of students proficient by 2014. [Not even the wealthiest districts in America](#) managed to achieve the goal. Some states responded to the policy by lowering their standards. Georgia and Wisconsin made it look as if nearly 100 percent of students were reading at grade level, a phenomenon the Thomas B. Fordham Institute dubbed "[the proficiency illusion](#)."

It's crucial that literacy goals are seen in a sweet spot of difficult, but achievable. Locke and Latham warn leaders that if a goal is too difficult, set at a level no one has shown they can reach, it eventually undermines individual motivation and effort. Superintendents and instructional leaders want to avoid teachers becoming demoralized, which can easily happen if the goals set for them are seen as impossible.

Peter Drucker, the father of modern management theory who developed the concept of management by objectives, reinforces this view: "The results should be hard to achieve—they should require "stretching," to use the current buzzword. But also, they should be within reach. To aim at results that cannot be achieved—or that can be only under the most unlikely circumstances—is not being ambitious; it is being foolish."¹¹

Better for district leaders to treat 72% as the floor for all and raise it once they have experience on what it takes to get there.

For districts whose communities insist on 100% proficiency, they might consider the approach the United Nations uses with its sustainability goals, which aim for [Zero Hunger](#). In schools, this would mean getting the number of students at the lowest performance level, usually the "below standard" category, down to zero. Then insist that all students eventually score as "partially proficient" or higher.

Is 70-72% achievable? This is where learning from the dynamic districts becomes essential. They are proof points on that path, growing achievement at a rate of 3-4% a year for the last three years. If the typical district or state—now at 45% proficient—can learn from its dynamic counterparts and grow at a similar rate, it will be at 70% by 2031.

It's crucial that literacy goals are seen in a sweet spot of difficult, but achievable... To aim at results that cannot be achieved... is not being ambitious; it is being foolish.



This Is Not About Beating The Odds

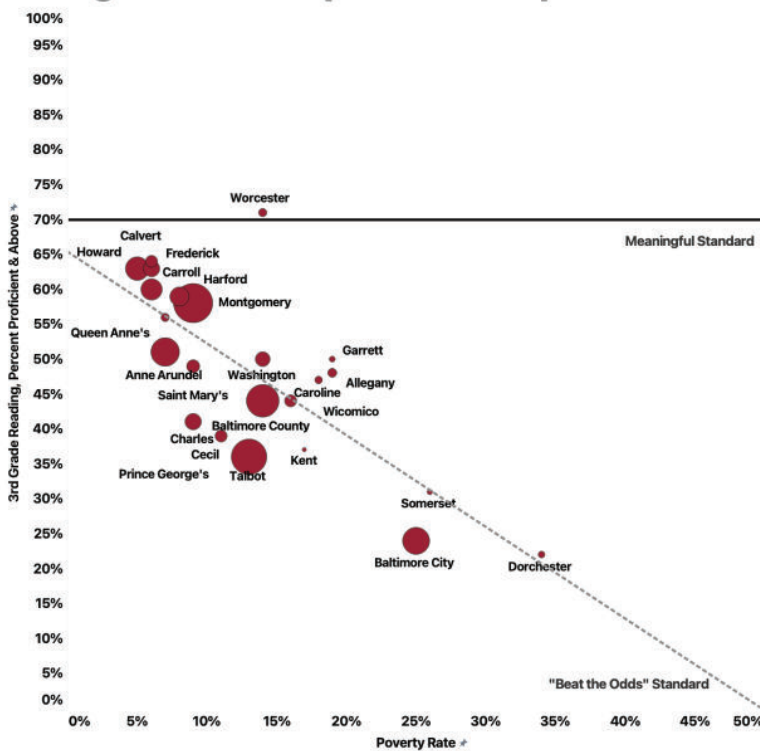
One thing missing from this recommendation is any recognition of school districts for “beating the odds”. Such acknowledgement is built on a statistical analysis that shows the correlation of third grade reading achievement and family income. For instance, in Montgomery County, Maryland, the largest district in Figure 7 below, their “expected” achievement on the regression line is 54%, while their actual proficiency level is 58%.

These analyses are an attempt to be fair and to encourage growth from various starting points. But the research from Georgetown University cited earlier doesn’t say that only 58% of students in one of America’s most prosperous suburbs need to have some college attainment, it says at least 72% need to be there.

FIGURE 7

The Standard is the Same for Everyone

“Beating the Odds” implies lower expectations for kids from high poverty families



And the research doesn’t say that 72% of students from high-income families need to have “some college” but that only 36% of students from low-income families need degrees and certificates. The end goal needs to be the same for everyone.

Comer Yates, the executive director of the Atlanta Speech School is [fond of saying](#) that poverty is a result of a lack of educational opportunity, but it is not a cause of low reading achievement. It’s up to us to provide that opportunity for all.

Remembering Our Ultimate Purpose

While achievement goals are important, we need to regularly return to our purposes. In his book, *How to Run a Government* -Michael Barber writes “a certain percentage passing a literacy test at age 11 is worthwhile—but it’s not the point. The point is that children should leave primary education able to read and write well because those skills are essential—and because being able to do so will change their lives.”¹²

Maryanne Wolf of the UCLA School of Education, writes in her book *Proust & the Squid*, that our ultimate purpose is to foster deep reading. What we’re really trying to cultivate are students who can evaluate arguments, understand others’ perspectives, reason inferentially, and stay immersed in great stories.¹³

3. Join A Network Of Like-Minded Districts

This summer, we are creating a network of districts who formally commit to reaching at least 70% of their elementary school students reading and writing proficiently in the next six years. While there are lots of meetings of district membership organizations, we believe that as more districts commit to reaching a shared goal, the value of coming together to solve common learning problems increases exponentially.

Districts need opportunities to learn from peers in similar situations trying to respond to similar

obstacles. The districts hoping to move from 40 to 50% proficiency have a lot to learn from each other. Similarly, the districts trying to ensure more success with English language learners, or any population of interest, also have a lot to learn from each other about how they are navigating implementation challenges.

Superintendents and instructional leaders who want to learn more can sign up at www.upswinglabs.org

Conclusion

Early literacy achievement in most states and districts has been stuck for the last three years. This report identifies four dynamic states and 260 districts, offering an initial glimpse into what some of them are doing to achieve steady growth.

Much is known about what effective schools generically do, but if we’re to get unstuck, we need specific guidance on improving reading and writing. This spring and summer, we hope to write detailed case studies about what—and how—the dynamic districts are doing differently.

Here's why the case study work matters: In an experiment, a Harvard Business School study asked participants to solve two problems. After solving the first, they're told whether they succeeded or failed. Those who succeeded on the first problem and spent less time reflecting on their strategies were more likely to fail on the second problem.¹⁴

After experiencing success, superintendents and instructional leaders need to inquire why. If they skip studying success, this slows us all down in the future.

Improvements are happening in fields all around us. The aerospace industry is creating new supersonic planes that will [fly from New York to London in 3 ½ hours](#) instead of 7. In biomedicine, scientists have created drugs [reducing the number of deaths](#) caused by the most historically stubborn cancers.¹⁵ Education can see the same widespread progress, but only if we learn what strategies and practices are making dynamic districts and states excel.

Appendix 1: Dynamic Districts, By State

Percent Meeting & Exceeding Standards

State	School District	2022	2023	2024	Average Annual Change(%)	Number Tested (2024)	Poverty Rate(%)	Diversit (%)
Louisiana	Assumption Parish	27.0	36.0	40.0	6.5	6.5	220	44
	Bossier Parish	43.0	50.0	53.0	5.0	5.0	1,724	42
	City of Moreoe School District	26.0	30.0	36.0	5.0	5.0	583	83
	Desoto Parish	45.0	47.0	52.0	3.5	3.5	339	44
	East Baton Rouge Parish	350	39.0	42.0	3.5	3.5	3,045	83
	Livingston Parish	440	45.0	52.0	4.0	4.0	2,028	25
	Morehouse Parish	11.0	16.0	22.0	5.5	5.5	219	65
	Natchitoches Parish	40.0	50.0	52.0	6.0	6.0	334	60
	Orleans Parish	250	31.0	39.0	7.0	7.0	183	97
	Rapides Parish	42.0	47.0	50.0	4.0	4.0	1,543	48
	St. Martin Parish	350	40.0	43.0	4.0	4.0	518	49
	St. Mary Parish	31.0	32.0	43.0	6.0	6.0	568	55
	St. Tammany Parish	550	61.0	62.0	3.5	3.5	2,712	32
	Terrebonne Parish	46.0	48.0	55.0	4.5	4.5	1,111	44
Webster Parish	210	26.0	35.0	7.0	7.0	367	45	
South Carolina	Anderson 04	55.6	65.3	70.9	10.5	234	19	20
	Beaufort 01	48.2	50.6	63.2	3.8	1,612	19	56
	Colleton 01	23.5	31.4	33.5	6.1	352	30	55
	Darlington 01	36.1	42.7	46.1	6.7	648	26	55
	Edgefield 01	37.4	43.6	46.5	6.0	254	19	47
	Florence 01	47.9	56.6	60.2	8.0	1,127	20	60
	Porence Osis	29.4	41.6	44.1	8.6	204	28	69
	Georgetown 01	41.8	45.7	50.0	6.3	554	24	49
	Greenwood 50	42.8	52.7	62.0	14.3	606	21	59
	Horry 01	54.0	60.7	62.1	4.7	3,434	17	34
	Marion 10	19.5	23.0	30.9	9.7	288	35	81
	Newberry 01	37.0	39.6	52.5	14.2	404	22	52
	Spartanburg 06	38.8	44.5	46.6	5.0	849	17	52
	Spartanburg 07	44.1	48.5	52.3	6.0	511	24	61
	Sumter 01	34.2	35.6	41.3	6.4	945	28	70
	Willamsburg 01	21.8	26.2	37.6	13.6	210	32	91
	York 02	62.6	66.2	68.3	3.9	662	9	20
York 03	48.1	50.4	53.2	4.0	1,144	15	55	
Mississippi	Brookhaven School District	32.9	42.5	53.1	10.1	207	28	65
	Columbus Municipal School District	25.9	32.2	39.4	6.8	246	33	95
	Desato County School District	54.0	56.2	62.2	4.1	2,580	13	47
	George County School District	48.5	52.0	66.2	8.8	311	20	11
	Grenada School District	60.6	72.5	77.0	8.2	269	34	50
	Hancock County School District	59.7	65.8	74.6	7.4	315	21	11
	Itawamba County School District	46.9	52.6	66.0	9.5	247	16	8
	Jackson County School District	61.6	66.4	74.4	6.4	637	15	14
	Jones County School District	43.1	51.7	59.3	8.1	651	21	32
	Lafayette County School District	50.0	52.4	63.3	6.7	210	16	22
	Lamar ounty School District	58.6	63.1	73.0	7.2	736	17	33
	Lee Colnty School District	45.3	47.9	56.9	5.8	499	20	32
	Lowndes County School District	52.7	60.0	73.5	10.4	359	18	40
	Madison County School District	68.0	72.6	78.7	5.3	895	10	47
	Marshall County School District	20.7	23.0	39.7	9.5	239	28	60
	Natchez-Adams School District	23.2	32.0	37.3	7.0	228	36	90
	Ocean Springs School District	67.6	80.1	82.7	7.6	423	11	18
	Oxford School District	55.6	64.2	65.8	5.1	389	15	43
	Pearl Public School District	56.7	71.5	74.2	8.8	291	20	47
	Picayune School District	35.3	42.8	58.7	11.7	225	26	35
	Pontotoc County School District	48.6	58.1	59.8	5.6	266	21	21
	Rankin County School District	58.4	65.3	72.6	7.1	1,276	12	28
	Scott County School District	35.0	38.5	51.0	8.0	304	27	50
	South Panola School District	44.0	56.9	56.7	5.9	305	33	58
	Stone County School District	49.5	59.8	69.3	9.9	202	23	20
	Tishomingo County School District	45.3	57.8	60.3	7.5	214	19	6
	Tupelo Public School District	44.0	51.1	56.7	5.8	528	21	60
	Vicksburg Warren School District	42.8	50.3	56.6	6.9	509	33	65
Wayne County School District	40.3	51.7	60.1	9.9	218	32	56	

Appendix 1: Dynamic Districts, By State

Percent Meeting & Exceeding Standards

State	School District	2022	2023	2024	Average Annual Change(%)	Number Tested (2024)	Poverty Rate(%)	Diversity (%)
Illinois	Alton CUSD 11	9.9	11.6	19.6	4.9	384	20	36
	Arlington Heights SD 25	39.3	45.2	52.2	6.5	596	4	11
	Ball Chatham CUSD 5	29.6	38	39.7	5.1	302	6	11
	Berwyn North SD 98	13.6	19.9	23.9	5.2	275	22	93
	Burbank SD 111	13.8	23.8	22.4	4.3	347	21	62
	Cary CCSD 26	24.1	33	36	6.0	262	5	23
	CCSD 89	46	44.9	56.9	5.5	242	6	22
	CUSD 200	47.9	51.9	55.8	4.0	862	6	25
	Deerfield SD 109	51.3	58.3	60.7	4.7	284	3	6
	East St Louis SD 189	12.6	12.3	20.1	3.8	242	45	98
	Fremont SD 79	28.3	36.8	37.7	4.7	209	3	20
	Geneva CUSD 304	40.2	46.9	51.5	5.7	344	3	12
	Glenview CCSD 34	37.1	55.6	59.3	11.1	428	8	16
	Indian Springs SD 109	21.4	19.9	34.9	6.8	220	25	45
	Kirby SD 140	32.7	27.2	41.3	4.3	339	11	19
	Lake Zurich CUSD 95	50.5	62.4	62.9	6.2	437	4	11
	Lemonit-Bromberek C:SO 113A	40.3	46.8	50.4	5.1	296	5	11
	Mannheim SD 83	13	17.8	23.6	5.3	230	17	89
	Marion CUSD 2	34.5	52.4	55	10.3	263	19	55
	Maywood-Melrose Park-Broadview 89	15	18.8	28.7	6.9	468	24	82
	Mount Prospect SD 57	31.5	36.3	45.1	6.8	205	5	10
	New Lenox SD 122	32.6	43.2	43.5	5.5	522	4	13
	Pekin PSD 108	17.6	22.8	27.4	4.9	308	18	7
	Ridgeland SD 122	28.8	32.4	37	4.1	240	24	41
	SD U-46	16.9	17.4	24.2	3.7	2,390	13	65
	St Charles CUSD 303	44.3	50.4	55	5.4	850	4	16
	Sterling CUSD 5	24.2	28.2	31.2	3.5	217	18	37
	Summit Hill SD 161	47.9	52	60	6.1	227	5	22
	Waterico CUSD 5	48	62	62.7	7.4	205	3	3
	Waucanda CUSD 118	29.6	38.5	40.5	5.5	308	7	34
	Winnetka SD 36	53.5	65.8	69.7	8.1	211	2	4
	Woodridge SD 68	35.5	41	42.7	3.6	290	10	41
Weodstock CUSD 200	32.7	30.6	40.6	4.0	437	8	41	
California	Barring Unified	19.4	31.5	29.4	6.0	303	21	83
	Benicia Unified	50.0	64.2	69.4	4.7	331	5	31
	Compton Unified	34.9	36.5	42.8	4.0	1,276	24	99
	Delano Union Elementary	30.6	33.3	42.3	5.9	643	28	88
	Dinuba Unified	31.6	35.3	41.6	5.0	436	22	94
	Dixon Unified	29.2	33.7	36.5	3.6	221	10	64
	Empire Union Elementary	23.8	27.7	31.1	3.6	316	19	74
	Enterprise Elementary	39.3	38.6	46.6	3.6	350	19	23
	Fallbrook Union Elemerkary	46.4	49.6	54.6	4.1	565	12	67
	Fountain Valley Elementary	69.3	78.7	78.3	4.5	626	8	20
	Fowler Unified	33.5	37.6	42.2	4.3	170	22	83
	La Habra City Elementary	32.2	34.6	40.2	4.0	447	12	88
	Little Lake City Elementary	45.1	57.5	57.1	6.0	359	11	91
	Morongo Unified	25.7	31.1	34.9	4.6	596	21	47
	Norris Elementary	46.6	47.0	58.7	6.0	390	8	41
	Oakdale Joint Unified	37.3	45.5	48.4	5.6	358	13	43
	Parier Unified	17.7	23.1	26.5	4.4	220	34	99
	Pleasant Valley	55.6	55.4	63.0	3.7	593	7	45
	Richland Union Elementary	16.4	23.7	35.7	9.7	260	25	94
	Rosernead Elementary	43.8	53.1	52.3	4.3	269	23	39
	Salida Union Elementary	27.6	40.7	34.7	3.6	217	15	72
	Sanger Unified	44.9	46.3	52.6	3.8	1,006	18	71
	Santa Cruz City Elementary	46.7	54.3	59.9	6.6	283	8	41
	Sierra Sands Undied	33.9	38.3	42.2	4.1	374	16	40
	South Whittier Elementary	17.6	29.3	27.6	5.0	247	18	96
	Southern Kem Unified	20.7	29.2	31.4	5.4	268	21	72
	Weaver Union	25.3	34.5	33.9	4.3	325	3	74
	Yucaipa-Calimesa Joint Unified	32.6	28.2	39.9	3.7	595	6	53

Appendix 1: Dynamic Districts, By State

Percent Meeting & Exceeding Standards

State	School District	2022	2023	2024	Average Annual Change(%)	Number Tested (2024)	Poverty Rate(%)	Diversit (%)
Ohio	Akron City	37.7	42.8	48.1	5.2	1,394	29	53
	Canton City	32.8	35.1	44.2	5.7	537	35	47
	Cincinnati Public Schools	44.7	47.5	57.0	6.2	2,491	32	71
	Cleveland Heights-University Heights City	59.4	65.5	68.4	4.5	326	19	76
	Elyria City Schools	41.4	45.8	51.0	4.8	414	26	36
	Lakewood City	73.1	80.3	81.9	4.4	277	15	13
	Mayfield Cily	73.2	80.4	87.9	7.4	282	8	26
	Miamisburg City	54.2	61.7	67.1	6.5	348	14	15
	Northwest Local	53.3	56.3	63.2	5.0	606	16	42
	Shaker Heights City	67.2	70.9	75.3	4.1	303	11	50
	Toledo City	28.6	36.0	38.8	5.1	1,385	32	60
	Tray City	66.0	68.0	81.1	7.6	320	11	10
West Clermont Local	60.9	67.5	69.1	4.1	584	9	9	
Pennsylvania	Alloona Area SD	44.5	51.1	57.2	6.3	484	19	12
	Bristol Township SD	26.9	33.3	36.3	4.7	444	15	32
	Central York SD	54.0	59	61.1	3.6	401	7	25
	Cheltenham SD	54.4	60.6	61.4	3.5	290	9	63
	Conewago Valey SD	57.2	58.7	69.5	6.2	249	11	19
	Connellsville Area SD	40.8	42.4	54	6.7	272	18	4
	Daniel Boone Area SD	52.0	59.1	73.9	11.0	203	8	15
	East Stroudsburg Area SD	45.8	53.8	57.5	5.8	374	17	46
	Ephrata Area SD	47.4	67.5	66.3	9.5	282	8	15
	Hempfield Area SD	62.4	69.1	70.2	3.9	356	10	3
	Lebanon SD	28.0	35	42.7	7.3	337	21	77
	Mecharicsburg Area SD	59.2	61	72.5	6.6	295	9	18
	Muhlenberg SD	37.2	38.5	44.8	3.8	259	15	64
	New Castle Area SD	10.7	27.4	37.2	13.3	207	31	27
	Penn Manor SD	62.3	64.5	69.7	3.7	380	9	23
	Penniridge SD	58.8	67.4	70.6	5.9	456	6	12
	Pittsburgh SD	39.1	48.2	46.8	3.9	1,170	24	56
	Pottstown SD	28.9	35	38.4	4.7	224	25	55
	Quakertown Community SO	36.6	43.5	47.6	5.5	311	8	15
	Scranton SD	23.7	36.6	37.4	6.9	564	28	53
Shaler Area SD	74.9	80.6	83.8	4.4	271	9	5	
Solanco SD	53.1	55.9	60.5	3.7	233	15	12	
Wareboro Area SD	48.8	51.6	58.7	4.9	305	13	9	
Willamsport Area SD	45.6	42.3	55.1	4.8	316	20	23	
West Virginia	Cabell County Schools	40.6	45.6	51.2	5.3	783	41	8
	Kanawha County Schools	35.5	36.5	45.1	48	1,561	19	11
	Logan County Schools	27.8	39.7	42.7	7.4	318	28	2
	Marion County Schools	40.5	41.2	48.3	3.9	500	17	5
	Mercer County Schools	29.3	35.6	46.1	8.4	614	24	10
	Monongalia County Schools	46.1	49.4	55.6	47	813	14	6
	Ohio County Schools	48.7	56.5	65.2	82	358	17	9
	Putnam County Schools	44.9	49.6	60.0	7.6	639	11	3
Raleigh County Schools	40.1	45.3	51.6	5.7	716	23	9	
Kentucky	Clay Courty	52	64	68	8	230	42	3
	Covington Independent	37	40	51	7	348	40	51
	Daviess County	44	46	53	4.5	B65	13	12
	Harlan County	42	52	66	12	268	42	3
	Hopkins County	44	55	58	7	488	22	14
	Jahnson County	48	51	56	4	245	26	2
	Knox County	38	42	62	12	306	37	3
	Lincoln County	34	43	46	6	260	23	6
	Marion County	40	45	53	6.5	217	17	14
	Mercer County	30	34	46	8	206	17	11
	Nelson County	24	26	39	7.5	320	10	5
	Owensbora independent	38	47	48	5	395	25	27
	Pike County	50	57	61	5.5	531	36	2
	Pulaski County	57	59	64	3.5	542	22	7
Rawan County	42	45	50	4	268	23	5	

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Percent Meeting & Exceeding Standards

State	School District	2022	2023	2024	Average Annual Change(%)	Number Tested (2024)	Poverty Rate(%)	Diversit (%)
Georgia	Baldwin County	16.0	21.2	26.0	4.5	324	26	70
	Buford City	63.3	65.3	71.2	4.0	434	13	38
	Burke County	17.5	20.3	25.0	3.7	276	28	67
	Elbert County	14.4	37.6	42.7	14.1	206	29	47
	Jones County	33.5	42.5	45.6	6.1	344	16	29
	Laurens County	32.7	37.9	40.5	3.9	464	24	36
	Marietta City	35.8	48.4	44.8	4.6	685	17	73
	Sumter County	10.1	16.5	20.7	5.3	241	38	91
	Thomas County	29.9	33.2	41.8	6.0	380	24	42
	Walker County	26.7	33.2	36.6	4.9	640	19	10
Ware County	26.0	30.6	37.3	5.7	415	34	45	
Texas	Alice ISD	35.8	40.2	44.5	4.4	321	29	92
	Big Spring ISO	36.7	37.7	45.0	4.2	222	20	73
	Harmory Public Schools - Houston West	58.3	69.9	69.3	5.5	449	NA	50
	Harmory Public Schools - South Texas	29.4	37.1	42.7	6.6	279	NA	93
	Henderson ISD	30.5	34.8	41.1	5.3	207	23	53
	Rio Grande City Grulla ISD	37.2	37.6	46.8	4.8	634	35	99
	Roma ISO	68.3	80.0	81.1	6.4	387	42	99
	School of Science and Technology	49.2	58.9	62.6	6.7	519	NA	75
	Valey View ISD	50.6	54.3	59.1	4.2	215	36	100
Vanguard Acaderry	49.6	57.7	60.5	5.4	463	NA	99	
New Jersey	Berkeley Township	30.6	33.8	37.8	3.6	289	12	26
	Cherry Hill	56.0	59.2	63.1	3.5	768	7	24
	Flemington-Raritan Regional	28.8	35.3	45.4	8.3	324	5	26
	Mastery Schools Of Camden, Inc.	11.4	13.5	22.3	5.5	211	NA	97
	Old Bridge Township	51.0	52.8	58.3	3.7	558	6	26
	Piscataway Township	44.7	47.7	53.4	4.4	511	7	50
	Rahway	22.6	25.9	29.7	3.6	256	12	80
	Wall Township	48.5	51.3	61.4	6.5	225	4	12
Wayne Township	51.9	56.5	63.4	6.8	525	6	18	
Tennessee	Bartlett	44.4	48.3	52.3	4.0	637	8	35
	Blount County	29.7	37.0	40.3	5.3	737	14	11
	Dickson County	36.8	42.2	46.7	4.9	555	17	13
	Kingsport	41.2	45.4	48.6	3.7	566	25	13
	Sullivan County	31.5	37.9	42.9	5.7	548	22	4
Washington County	39.7	49.6	51.9	6.1	566	14	6	

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Percent Meeting & Exceeding Standards

State	School District	2022	2023	2024	Average Annual Change(%)	Number Tested (2024)	Poverty Rate(%)	Diversit (%)
North Carolina	Lenoir County	33.3	36.7	49.0	7.9	555	28	62
	Martin County Schools	25.4	39.3	44.6	9.6	222	29	62
	Nash County	28.8	32.8	35.9	3.6	967	23	68
	Orange County Schools	41.2	48.8	51.1	5.0	503	11	41
	Rutherford County Schools	44.8	49.5	54.9	5.1	554	26	22
New Hampshire	Concord	40.0	39.0	51.0	5.5	270	10	13
	Landonderry	47.0	53.0	59.0	6.0	280	4	27
	Manchester	20.0	22.0	29.0	4.5	820	17	92
	Nashus	36.0	40.0	43.4	3.5	623	11	68
	Rochester	22.0	34.0	39.0	8.5	250	14	26
	Salem	48.0	54.0	56.0	4.0	255	4	27
Colorado	Durango 9-R	44.8	43.6	56.9	6.1	339	10	28
	Jannstown-Milliken RE- 5J	27.3	29.7	39.0	6.0	279	7	32
	Pueblo City 60	20.1	22.9	27.6	3.8	946	20	74
	Roaring Fork RE-1	28.7	28.4	38.2	4.8	314	9	57
Indiana	Concord Community Schools	24.0	26.2	33.8	4.9	370	16	56
	Middlebury Community Schools	41.9	45.3	60.9	9.5	299	8	13
	MED Warren Township	13.8	16.8	21.5	3.8	810	20	76
	Plymouth Community Schod Corp	26.6	33.8	37.4	5.4	230	11	31
Hawaii	Kau-Keaau-Pahoa Complex	26.0	29.0	34.3	4.2	408	0	0
	Castle-Kahuku Complex	46.0	50.0	53.6	3.8	542	0	0
Delaware	Brandywine School Distriet	35.0	39.0	42.0	4.0	408	12	47
	Woodbridge School District	30.0	42.0	44.0	7.0	542	20	49
wyoming	Natrona #1	41.9	43.9	52.9	5.5	935	11	16
Maryland	Allegarry County	41.3	48.3	51.0	4.9	537	21	6
	Talbot County	37.4	35.0	47.9	5.2	239	14	40
Minnesota	St. Francis Area School	44.1	46.6	55.1	5.5	274	6	7
	Willmar	27.0	26.8	35.3	4.1	278	17	58
Washington	Shelton	25.4	27.4	42.5	8.5	259	19	44
	Steilacoom Historical	46.5	58.9	61.5	7.3	216	6	30
Arizona	Chinle Unified District	23.0	28.0	40.0	8.5	201	34	100
	Osborn Elementary District	19.0	26.0	27.0	4	257	24	82
Oregon	Hermiston SD 8	32.6	31.4	40.4	3.9	395	13	60
Rhode Island	Coventry	40.0	44.6	49.0	4.5	290	8	9
Nevada	Humbalat	31.0	31.0	40.0	5.0	237	13	42
South Dakota	Pierre 32-2	45.9	51.8	54.6	4.3	209	9	21
Direct of Columbia	DC Prep	14.0	18.0	21.0	3.5	208	NA	96

Data Notes

Third grade reading achievement data was obtained, when publicly available, from thirty-five state department of education websites.

Ten states—Florida, New York, Wisconsin, Alabama, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Nebraska, Maine, Alaska, and Vermont—have revised their English Language Arts tests and/or proficiency cut scores and lack three years of consistent data to be included at this time.

District-level achievement data—in aggregated lists— was not publicly accessible in five states: Missouri, Iowa, New Mexico, North Dakota, and Utah.

Six states—Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia—have state proficiency standards that are half a grade-level or more below the midpoint of NAEP Basic (225).¹⁶ Data for these states and districts is included in this report but should be interpreted with caution.

Massachusetts data was publicly available. It is the only state that does not have any districts meeting the criteria of growing 3-4% a year for the last three years. The state of Hawaii is usually considered one school district, but we can identify two clusters of schools known as complex areas that meet our dynamic district criteria.

Districts smaller than 200 students tested in third grade are not included in this report, as their small size makes them prone to large changes in test scores that have little to do with underlying changes in teaching and learning. For example, Steubenville, Ohio, the focus of the latest episodes in Emily Hanford's [Sold a Story](#) podcast, is not included here because of its small size.

There is some overlap between the dynamic districts identified here and the district success stories in the [Education Recovery Scorecard](#). But this report has a different focus: growth in third grade literacy achievement since the pandemic ended, examining scores from 2021-22 to 2023-24. The ERS report is focused on the extent to which all elementary and middle school reading and math achievement has recovered to pre-pandemic levels (2019).

Endnotes

- ¹See for instance, Elizabeth Heubeck, "Mississippi Students Surged in Reading Over the Last Decade. Here's How Schools Got Them There," Education Week, June 19, 2023, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/mississippi-students-surged-in-reading-over-the-last-decade-heres-how-schools-got-them-there/2023/06>. See also: Amanda Wicks and Will McKenzie, "The Best Way to Teach Reading Is Proven — What Mississippi, Colorado Get Right," The 74 Million, December 19, 2023, <https://www.the74million.org/article/the-best-way-to-teach-reading-is-proven-what-mississippi-colorado-get-right/>.
- ²Kymyona Burk and Carey Wright, "New Study: Holding Kids Back One Key Factor in Mississippi's Reading Revolution," The 74, February 15, 2023, <https://www.the74million.org/article/new-study-holding-kids-back-one-key-factor-in-mississippis-reading-revolution/>.
- ³Morgan Polikoff, *Beyond Standards: The Fragmentation of Education Governance and the Promise of Curriculum Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2021).
- ⁴Natalie Wexler, "What Nobody Is Saying About the NAEP Reading Scores," Substack (blog), February 2, 2025, <https://nataliewexler.substack.com/p/what-nobody-is-saying-about-the-naep>.
- ⁵For more detail on Marietta City's approach, especially their educator coaching cycle, see Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, "CARES District Case Study: Rewriting How Reading is Taught." (Atlanta, GA: Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, 2024). <https://gpee.org>
- ⁶John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles & Practices*, 2nd Edition, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017), Chapter 2.
- ⁷Dan Heath, *Reset: How to Fix What's Not Working* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2025).
- ⁸Edwin A. Locke and Gary P. Latham, eds., *New Developments in Goal Setting and Task Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203082744>.
- ⁹Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, Martin Van Der Werf, and Michael C. Quinn, "After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031" (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2023), cew.georgetown.edu/Projections2031.
- ¹⁰Richard Rothstein, "Lessons—Goals 2000' Scorecard: Failure Pitches a Shutout," Economic Policy Institute, December 22, 1999, <https://www.epi.org/>
- ¹¹Peter F. Drucker, "Managing Oneself," Harvard Business Review, January 2005.
- ¹²Michael Barber, *How to Run a Government: So that Citizens Benefit and Taxpayers Don't Go Crazy* (London: Penguin, 2015).
- ¹³Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).
- ¹⁴Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (New York: Wiley, 2018).
- ¹⁵American Cancer Society. [Cancer Facts & Figures 2025](#). Atlanta: American Cancer Society; 2025.
- ¹⁶The most recent, and probably last, mapping of state proficiency standards onto the NAEP scales occurred in 2022. For more, see <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/statemapping/%5C%5C>