NATIONAL PARENTS UNION | CENTER FOR POLICY & ACTION

THE NEW READING REVOLUTION

How States Are Rewriting the Literacy Story

Introduction

The literacy crisis in the United States is no longer looming – it is here, and it is dire. The country has reached a breaking point in literacy, with consequences that will echo for generations if we don't act now.

According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report, twelfth graders posted their lowest average reading score since the exam began, and 32% scored below Basic, the lowest possible benchmark. That's twelve points higher than in 1992. Moreover, while the top performers held steady, the majority of those below them slipped backward. Students reported declining confidence in their reading abilities, while they also faced more rigorous assignments requiring analyzing evidence in persuasive writing. While the scores are indicative of pandemic-era learning loss, the decline in reading scores across grades began almost a decade earlier and they also show us that too many students are leaving school unable to read proficiently and unprepared for the demands of college and careers.[1]

In recent years, forty states have undergone a rapid and often bipartisan shift toward enacting literacy laws anchored in the Science of Reading. These laws, which are of varying quality, typically emphasize evidence-based instruction, high-quality instructional materials, universal K-3 reading screeners, targeted interventions for struggling students, professional development and coaching for educators. Some also have promotion or retention rules tied to third-grade reading proficiency.[2] Most states are still in the early stages of rolling out new literacy laws, and while there are clear early wins in some places – Louisiana's recovery after the pandemic and Mississippi's sustained gains are notable examples, and will be discussed later in this report – the overall picture is uneven.

Evidence from multiple states shows that the support behind the implementation matters as much as the strength of the statute on paper. Professional development, coaching, and access to high-quality instructional materials are far stronger predictors of student outcomes than legislative mandates alone. Many states face capacity challenges and political debates, particularly around the use of third-grade retention policies.[3] At the same time, retention requirements such as those in Indiana and South Carolina can successfully draw attention to literacy gaps, but must be paired with strong supports like tutoring and summer learning. [4, 5]

Federal Literacy Mandates

While literacy policy has largely been driven by states in recent years, federal mandates provide the framework that help shape state action. The most significant is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2015. Under ESSA, states are required to assess reading annually in grades 3-8 and once in high school, to report results publicly, and to design accountability systems that flag schools where students are not meeting proficiency benchmarks. The law emphasizes the use of evidence-based practices, requiring that interventions in struggling schools – including those focused on reading – be grounded in research rather than local preference or tradition. [6]

Prior to ESSA, the federally-funded National Reading Panel (NRP) assessed the effectiveness of the various approaches to literacy instruction. The findings served as the basis of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which included a teacher training program called Put Reading First, which was more prescriptive in requiring phonics-based instruction in K-3 classrooms.[7] While NCLB was replaced by the more current ESSA statute, many of today's Science of Reading reforms are built on the same foundational principles – grounding instruction in the components identified by the NRP: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.[8]

Beyond ESSA, federal policy influences literacy through funding streams. Title I dollars support high-poverty schools, many of which use these funds for early reading interventions and tutoring. Title II supports teacher professional development. These supports set parameters that states must meet. Assessments and accountability are federally required, but the choice of curricula, pedagogy, and interventions is left to states and districts.[9] As a result, state-level literacy laws sometimes go beyond ESSA's baseline, translating federal expectations into specific programs and timelines for action.

The Importance of Literacy Laws

More states are passing literacy laws rooted in evidence-based learning, aiming to move classrooms away from instructional approaches such as three-cueing or "balanced literacy," which encourage students to guess words from pictures or context rather than decode them directly. Research has shown that such methods are less effective, particularly for struggling readers, prompting states like Ohio and Indiana to explicitly ban three-cueing from classrooms.[10]

Most state literacy statutes share a common architecture built around several policy levers. First, they require or encourage districts to adopt high-quality instructional materials aligned to structured literacy practices, drawn from state-approved lists to ensure fidelity. Minnesota's READ Act, for example, mandates that districts purchase evidence-based curricula vetted by the state and the University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Education Improvement (CAREI).[11] Second, nearly all of the laws call for universal screening of K-3 students multiple times per year to identify reading difficulties early, with many also requiring dyslexia screening and supports, as seen in Wisconsin and West Virginia.[12,13]

A third element is teacher professional development and coaching. In Mississippi, the Literacy-Based Promotion Act paired its retention policy with statewide literacy coaches and mandatory teacher training in structured literacy. It was this combination that researchers credit with driving the state's NAEP gains.[14] Like Mississippi, Texas requires all K-3 teachers and principals to complete "Reading Academies," an intensive 60-hour program designed to integrate the Science of Reading into classroom practice.[15]

States also include requirements for intervention and extended learning opportunities for struggling readers, through summer reading camps, tutoring programs, and tiered support frameworks. The Education Recovery Scorecard credits tutoring and summer programming for Louisiana's successful literacy recovery efforts, which helped it to become the only state to fully rebound in reading post-pandemic.[16] In addition, Mississippi and South Carolina require retention for students who do not meet reading benchmarks by the end of third grade.[17,18]

Together, these policy levers represent a nationwide effort to reverse declining NAEP scores by aligning classroom practice to the Science of Reading and ensuring students receive consistent, evidence-based instruction from the earliest grades.

The Comprehensive Literacy State Development Program

Perhaps the most significant discretionary federal effort to support literacy reform in the past decade is the Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) program. Established under Sections 2221-2225 of ESEA, as amended, CLSD provides competitive grants to states with the goal of improving literacy outcomes from birth through grade twelve, particularly for disadvantaged students, English learners, and children with disabilities.[19]

The program requires states to develop or strengthen a statewide comprehensive literacy plan and to subgrant funds to high-need districts and early childhood providers. Grant funds can be used for professional development, literacy coaching, curriculum alignment, interventions, and family engagement initiatives.[20] Grant recipients include:

- Ohio, which received a $60 million CLSD grant to expand literacy supports in underserved districts.[21]
- Arizona, which has used its $20 million award to implement birth-12 initiatives in high-poverty communities.[22]
- Maryland, which has directed their $40 million award toward evidence-based interventions and teacher training.[23]

Whether CLSD recipients outperform non-recipients is still under study. Early evaluations of related programs – such as the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy (SRCL) initiative – found that grant-funded districts adopted more evidence-based practices and often saw modest but significant improvements in reading achievement. For CLSD specifically, many grants have only been awarded in the past few years, so outcome data remain limited.[24] These grants are intended to allow states the ability to better align their curricula with the Science of Reading, increase access to literacy coaching, and expand family engagement efforts. However, there is not yet robust, peer-reviewed evidence that CLSD recipients are posting higher NAEP or state assessment scores compared to non-recipient states.

Even without definitive outcome data, CLSD plays a crucial role by giving states and districts resources to build the infrastructure that literacy laws require. In effect, CLSD grants allow states to accelerate implementation, particularly in high-need districts that might otherwise lack capacity. Implementation and eventual outcomes should be watched closely to inform potential improvements to the program.

The "Mississippi Miracle"

Mississippi's rise in reading achievement is often described as the "Mississippi Miracle," a phrase intended to capture the remarkable turnaround. Central to this transformation was the Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA), passed in 2013, which established clear expectations for early reading. The LBPA required annual K-3 reading assessments, interventions, and supports for students performing below grade-level benchmarks, and a promotion gate at the end of third grade where students unable to demonstrate proficiency could be retained. While the law provided the structure by which school districts began to operate, it did not stand alone. The Mississippi Department of Education paired the law with strong implementation supports, including statewide literacy coaching, professional development in structured literacy, improved instructional materials, and an accountability framework to monitor progress.[25]

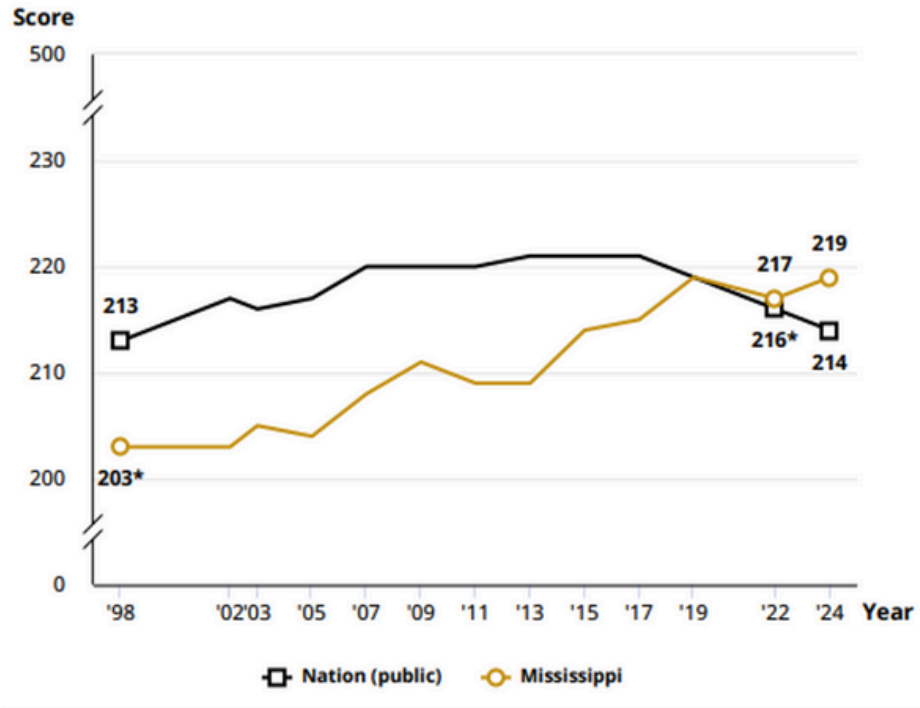


Chart from: https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard

The results were striking. Between 2013 and 2019, fourth grade reading scores in Mississippi increased by ten points on the NAEP test (considered to be roughly a grade-levels worth of improvement)– more than any other state during this time period. By 2019, the state's fourth graders had pulled even with the national average, a milestone that was unthinkable just a few years earlier. More recent data confirms the durability of these gains, with the 2024 NAEP average fourth-grade reading scores statistically unchanged from those in 2022, while national scores declined. For the first time, Mississippi outperformed the national average.[26]

There are still challenges, however. Mississippi's gains have been concentrated in the early grades, while middle school performance has been slower to improve. By eighth grade, reading proficiency rates remain lower than national averages, emphasizing the importance of sustaining early gains as students advance through the system. Additionally, not all districts have shared equally in the progress – some continue to lag in reaching proficiency levels or closing gaps with peers across the state and country.[27]

We learn several critical lessons from studying Mississippi's results, not the least of which is that literacy laws are most effective when they are paired with consistent capacity building, such as statewide coaching and robust professional development. Early, frequent screening ensures that students who fall behind are identified quickly, and accountability structures – including retention rules – create urgency for improvement. The "Mississippi Miracle" is less a product of one single law or policy than of a comprehensive, sustained effort to embed the Science of Reading into classrooms statewide.

Louisiana & the Post-Pandemic Recovery

Louisiana has become one of the most compelling examples of how state-level literacy policy can drive measurable gains, particularly in the wake of the pandemic-era learning loss. On the NAEP, for example, Louisiana's fourth-grade reading ranking climbed from 42nd in 2022 to 16th in 2024.[28] According to the Education Recovery Scorecard, Louisiana ranked first in the nation for reading recovery between 2019 and 2024, and second in math. It was the only state where the average student fully recovered to pre-pandemic levels in reading.[29]

LOUISIANA'S NATIONAL RANKINGS SINCE 2013

	2019	2022	2024	Since 2019	Since 2022
4th grade math	50	44	38	+12	+6
4th grade reading	50	42	16	+34	+26
8th grade math	49	45	43	+6	+2
8th grade reading	45	39	29	+16	+10

Chart from: https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard

These are substantial gains in a state with the highest illiteracy rate in the nation, where only fifteen percent of lower-income students and less than half of higher-income students can read with proficiency. At least a quarter of the population in five of every six parishes suffers from below-basic literacy, and twenty-one percent of adults in the state do not have a high school degree.[30] The results reflect a comprehensive policy approach found in Act 108, which was enacted by Louisiana's legislature in 2021 and required teachers to complete professional development in structured literacy aligned with the Science of Reading. The state expanded summer reading programs and tutoring, ensuring that struggling students had access to intensive interventions beyond the regular school year. An emphasis was placed on curriculum quality, incentivizing districts to adopt aligned instructional materials, and provided families with regular progress reports so parents could play an active role in their children's reading development.[31]

The lesson learned from Louisiana demonstrates that dramatic recovery is possible, even after pandemic-era setbacks, when states focus their policies on instruction, professional learning, and data transparency. At the same time, state policy alone is not enough. Implementation on the ground – particularly in high-poverty communities – remains crucial to sustaining gains.

Minnesota's Read Act

Mississippi and Louisiana highlight long-term reform and rapid recovery, but Minnesota represents a newer wave of literacy legislation that aims to embed attention for regularly overlooked student populations into its design from the outset. The Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act was signed into law in 2023, and it set an ambitious goal: that every child in the state read at or above grade level, beginning in kindergarten. Uniquely, the law explicitly includes supports for multilingual learners and students with disabilities, recognizing the diverse student population in Minnesota. In addition, school districts are prohibited from adopting new curricula that are not evidence-based or aligned to structured literacy practices.[32]

Central to the law is professional development, and the READ Act requires all K-3 teachers and principals to complete training through approved evidence-based providers by 2026. In the first year of rollout, more than 32,000 educators registered for literacy training.[33]

Comparative Snapshots

Beyond Mississippi, Louisiana, and Minnesota, several other states are reshaping literacy instruction through legislation.

TENNESSEE: The 2021 Tennessee Literacy Success Act (TLSA) requires phonics-based instruction, universal screeners for K-3 students, and robust state-supported professional development. The state evaluates student progress through the Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA).[34]

VIRGINIA: The Virginia Literacy Act of 2022 introduced one of the most comprehensive frameworks in the country. Its rollout began with K-3 students in the 2024-25 school year, expanding through grade eight by 2025-26. Educators are required to use evidence-based literacy instruction, assess student learning using approved screeners, and use student-level data to inform instruction and intervention. Families have access to online resources to support literacy development at home, and the state provides implementation playbooks and new literacy screeners to help districts align instruction with the Science of Reading.[35]

NORTH CAROLINA: The Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021 launched statewide professional development for teachers. In one of the largest deployments of structured literacy training in the country, twenty-nine school districts have completed the intensive Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training course as of 2023.[36]

TEXAS: Literacy reform was embedded into the state's broader HB3 education bill, which created mandatory "Reading Academies." These academies require more than 60 hours of professional learning for every K-3 teacher and principal, aiming to standardize the Science of Reading statewide.[37]

Together, these snapshots show how states are converging on a common set of levers – professional development, screeners, high-quality instructional materials, and explicit bans on ineffective practices – while tailoring implementation to local needs.

Conclusion

The latest NAEP results paint a stark picture: literacy in the United States is on a downward trajectory, with average reading scores for fourth and eighth graders at their lowest point in decades. This national decline highlights not only the urgency for state-level action but also the critical role of federal leadership. Literacy laws cannot remain symbolic gestures; after enactment, they must be implemented with fidelity, sustained over time, and continuously adjusted to address equity gaps.

Mississippi, Louisiana, and Minnesota show that progress is possible when literacy reforms are matched with strong implementation. Mississippi's decade-long investment in coaching, professional development, and accountability raised outcomes even in historically low-performing schools, demonstrating that with time and consistency states can close longstanding gaps. Louisiana's rapid recovery from pandemic setbacks illustrates how urgency, transparent data, and targeted interventions can drive measurable improvements in a short period of time. Minnesota's READ Act represents a new generation of literacy legislation that builds equity into policy design from the outset, ensuring that supports for multilingual learners and students with disabilities are not afterthoughts but priorities. Time will tell whether these changes impact student outcomes commensurate with Mississippi and Louisiana.

But these examples are potential exceptions in a national landscape where too many students continue to fall behind. States cannot sustain progress alone. Mississippi's and Louisiana's gains were supported by significant external funding while Minnesota's rollout relies heavily on state resources. However, isolated state progress is not enough to reverse a crisis that affects millions of students nationwide. Without continued funding, alignment of teacher preparation, and intentional support for multilingual learners and students with disabilities, the broader NAEP trends will not reverse. Federal policy and funding – through programs such as Title I and the Comprehensive Literacy State Development grants – must be expanded and stabilized so districts can sustain coaching, adopt high-quality instructional materials, and provide professional development that prepares teachers to deliver evidence-based reading instruction. In addition, federal leadership is needed to align teacher-preparation programs with the science of reading, ensuring that new educators enter classrooms equipped with the tools their students need.

Reversing this national crisis requires a partnership: federal policy to set the baseline, state laws to innovate and adapt, and local districts to execute with fidelity. Only with this multi-layered support can this country shift from decline to continuous progress in literacy.

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