



Preventing a Lost Generation:

Facing a Critical Moment for Students' Literacy



Senate Committee on

Health, Education, Labor & Pensions

Senator Bill Cassidy, M.D., Ranking Member

➡ What Happens When Kids Can't Read

Two-thirds of America's fourth and eighth graders are not proficient in reading.¹ In other words, if a student is proficient in reading, the classmates sitting to their left and right likely are not. This has a profound impact on students, teachers, and classroom dynamics.

It also has a profound impact on the direction of our country. We are at risk of having an entire generation of children, those who were in their prime learning years during the COVID-19 pandemic, fail to become productive adults if reading proficiency does not improve.

Literacy – the basic ability to read – is at the heart of all other learning. If students do not learn to read, they cannot read to learn in other subjects.

Think about mathematics – although it is a numbers-based subject, math relies on students being able to decode problems and identify the proper operations to solve it. Without literacy, the basic building blocks of mathematics become nearly impossible to conquer, which then precludes a student from advanced study.

And if students are not literate, they cannot be taught to be digitally literate to understand complex and rapidly evolving technologies. Similarly, instruction in history, civics, and all social sciences, rely on the ability to read and analyze complex texts. How can we teach students to be thriving citizens if they are not able to read our country's founding documents for themselves?

If we do not act, the long-term implications will be dire. We can expect these students will have difficulty making it to high school graduation. Nine out of ten high school dropouts were struggling readers in third grade.² Students who don't read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.³ This will alter their career trajectory profoundly. High school dropouts are already not eligible for 90 percent of jobs and cost the economy an estimated \$272,000 over their lifetime.⁴

We can also expect a significant cost to taxpayers and our society. Many previously struggling students end up as part of our nation's institutionalized population. The rate of high school dropouts is six times greater than that of those with a high school degree in adult and juvenile correctional facilities, nursing facilities, and other health care facilities.⁵ In 1999, when reading scores were higher than they are today, the National Reading Panel's interim report found that the cost to taxpayers of adult illiteracy is \$224 billion per year and that U.S. companies lost nearly \$40 billion annually because of illiteracy.⁶ In today's dollars, that amounts to \$409 billion and \$73 billion annually, respectively.

Illiteracy also presents concerns for global competitiveness and national security. When students cannot read, they cannot master advanced concepts and topics – especially in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. If we do not improve literacy instruction and get students reading proficiently, we have no hope as a country to compete in a global marketplace where the STEM labor force is vital. How can

¹ *National Achievement-Level Results*, National Assessment of Educational Progress (Oct. 24, 2022), <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/>.

² Donald J. Hernandez, Professor, *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*, The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2012), <https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-DoubleJeopardy-2012-Full.pdf>.

³ *National Achievement-Level Results*, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (Oct. 24, 2022), <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/>.

⁴ Anthony P. Carnevale et al., Director and Research Professor, *Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020*, Georgetown Public Policy Institute – Center on Education and the Workforce (June 2013), https://cewgeorgetown.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Recovery2020.FR_Web_.pdf; Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States, National Center for Education Statistics (Jan. 2020), <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/dropout/index.asp>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Economic Impacts of Dropouts*. National Dropout Prevention Center (n.d.), <https://dropoutprevention.org/resources/statistics/quick-facts/economic-impacts-of-dropouts/>.

we continue to be a leader in innovation and discovering new technologies if we are not equipping the next generation to take up such tasks?

Likewise, literacy is essential to our military. The Armed Forces Qualification Test assesses basic skills vital to our military's success, including solving basic math word problems, obtaining and understanding information from written material, and knowledge of science.⁷ Literacy is foundational to all these abilities. In 2022, qualification test scores dropped 13-percentage-points compared to pre-pandemic performances.⁸ This decline raises major concerns about the preparedness of our military.

Failure to address literacy challenges fails our students and our country.

➡ What the Data Says

Every two years, we administer the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), affectionately called “The Nation’s Report Card.” Unfortunately, we failed our last report card.

The 2022 NAEP results show that the average reading score for fourth graders is lower than it has been in over 20 years. For eighth and twelfth graders, average scores are at about a 30-year low.⁹ The 2022 NAEP Long-Term Trend assessment for nine-year-old students showed average reading scores not seen since 1999.¹⁰

Similarly, the 2022 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that America’s reading scores have been stagnant since 2000.¹¹ The Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) regularly administers PISA to 15-year-old students across 38 countries and 81 education systems. When the test was first administered in 2000, America’s average reading score was 504 out of 1000. In 2022, the average reading score was also 504. The highest average score for US students was 505 in 2018.

Since these tests began decades ago, we have seen increases in school spending, staffing, and advances in education research and technology. Yet we have no progress to show for it in our scores, which hovered around the same mediocre performance well before dramatic pandemic-related declines. Getting back to where we were pre-pandemic won’t be enough to change this tide of illiteracy.

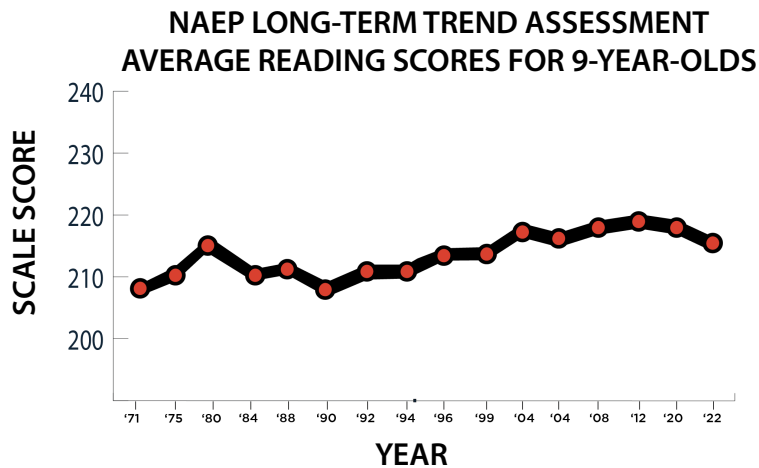
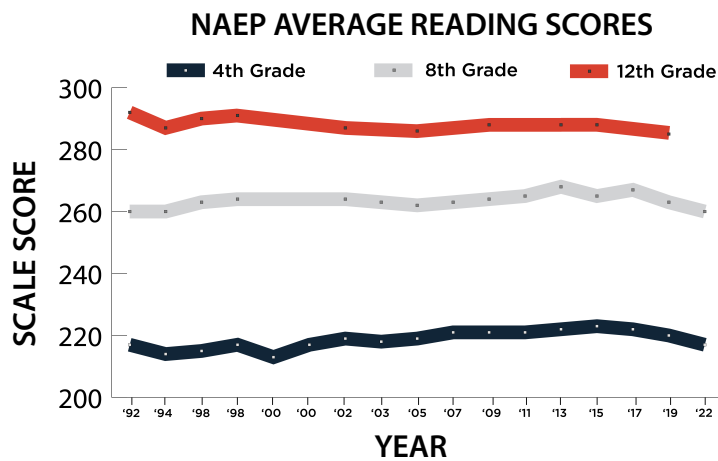
⁷ Thomas G. Sticht, Vice President, *Basic Skills in Defense*, Human Resources Research Organization (June 1982), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED237776.pdf>.

⁸ Micaela Burrow, *Army Qualification Test Scores Plummeted Further In 2022*, Daily Caller. (Sept. 16, 2022). <https://dailycaller.com/2022/09/16/army-qualification-scores-plummeted-2022/>.

⁹ *Scores Decline in NAEP Reading at Grades 4 and 8 Compared to 2019*, National Assessment of Educational Progress (Oct. 24, 2022), <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/reading/2022/>; *NAEP Report Card: 2019 NAEP Reading Assessment*, National Assessment of Educational Progress (2019), <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/reading/2019/g12/>.

¹⁰ *NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics*, National Assessment of Educational Progress (Sept. 1, 2022), <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltt/2022/>.

¹¹ *Program for International Student Assessment 2022 Results*, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Dec. 5, 2023), <https://www.oecd.org/publication/pisa-2022-results/>.



The decline in student literacy is also negatively impacting students' readiness for higher education. Scores continue plummeting on college entrance exams. In fall 2024, the College Board announced that the average composite score on the ACT hit its lowest level in 32 years.¹² This was the sixth consecutive year of declines in average scores, as well as declines in each academic subject covered by the test.

In reading, only 40 percent of students met the college readiness benchmark – which shows a five-percentage-point decline since 2019. In just one-year, average reading scores declined 0.3 points (from 20.4 to 20.1 out of 36).

When we zoom in on state-level NAEP scores, we see an even more troubling picture. Thirty states had significant decreases in fourth-grade students' average reading scores between early 2019 and early 2022. For eighth-grade students, 33 states saw a significant decline.¹³ The percent of students at or above proficiency declined by eight percentage points in Delaware and West Virginia, by seven points in Maine, and by six points in Minnesota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Virginia over the same period.

State administered assessments tend to paint a more forgiving picture of student performance than NAEP, given they are more closely aligned with each state's particular standards and teachers can tailor instruction to that particular test. However, even data from those assessments show stagnant and mediocre results. A recent analysis of 24 states' assessment data found that 11 states, nearly half, had either continued decline or minimal change in reading progress between 2021 and 2023.¹⁴

¹² April Rubin, *ACT Test Scores Fall to Lowest Levels in 32 Years*, Axios (Oct. 11, 2023), <https://www.axios.com/2023/10/11/act-test-scores-lowest-2023>.

¹³ *AEP Report Card: Reading State Achievement-Level Results*, National Assessment of Educational Progress (Oct. 24, 2022), <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/states/achievement/>.

¹⁴ Matt Barnum & Kalyn Belsha, *Blizzard of State Test Scores Shows Some Progress in Math, Divergence in Reading*, Chalkbeat (Oct. 2, 2023), <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2023/10/2/23896045/state-test-scores-data-math-reading-pandemic-era-learning-loss>.

A fall 2023 analysis found that only four states have surpassed pre-COVID proficiency rates in reading: Iowa, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee. These bright spots in the data have specific factors that likely led to this unique growth. In Iowa, 80 percent of schools offered in-person learning during the 2020-21 school year while schools in many other states remained shuttered. The other three states were early and expansive adopters of literacy reforms based on the science of reading.¹⁵ A January 2024 report found that average achievement in three states were above pre-pandemic levels in reading: Louisiana, Illinois, and Mississippi. Louisiana was also an early adopter of science-of-reading-based reforms.¹⁶

➡ Too Often, Kids Are Not Being Taught to Read Effectively

Thankfully, we have a framework that takes teaching students to read from an art to a literal science – the “science of reading.” Teachers and schools who follow it can ensure students are reading efficiently. This interdisciplinary body of evidence-based research identifies the key components students need to learn how to read and write, and how teachers can best implement these components into reading instruction. This model shows that students best learn how to read when they have explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction in the five key pillars of literacy: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.¹⁷ In practice, this looks like teachers intentionally instructing students in decoding words – sounding them out and understanding how they are constructed with letters and phonemes. It looks like students reading complex, engaging texts to build their knowledge and comprehension, rather than being assigned texts strictly based on their capabilities – even if their reading skills are behind the rest of the class.

Unfortunately, the science-of-reading framework is not what teachers have historically used to instruct students. The cornerstone of reading instruction in America’s schools for decades has been the disproven “three-cueing” method. Three-cueing is a core component of what was thought to be a “whole-language” or “balanced literacy” approach to reading instruction, but instead encourages educators to teach students to guess words they do not know rather than teach them how to decode them.

In practice, this looks like a student coming to a word they do not know in the text and a teacher encouraging them to guess what the word might be based on the first letter of the word, what the picture shows, or what might work given the rest of the sentence. Not to be confused with using context clues to aid comprehension in a particularly difficult passage, this method instructs students to guess until they get it right as a method for learning single words. Often, this leads to students memorizing specific words rather than being given the tools to decode any unknown word they might come across in the future.

Research shows that three-cueing promotes strategies that are used by poor readers, undermines sound-spelling relationships, obscures phonemic awareness, and hinders students’ progress.¹⁸ Put simply, these methods are insufficient to ensure that students learn how to read well and sets them up for failure in the long run.

A 2019 EdWeek Research Center survey found that nearly six in ten education professors cite “balanced literacy,” which is based on three-cueing, as their philosophy of teaching reading. Further, 75 percent of early elementary and special education teachers use the three-cueing method to teach literacy.¹⁹

¹⁵ Linda Jacobson, *Science of Reading Push Helped Some States Exceed Pre-Pandemic Performance*, The 74 Million (Oct. 17, 2023), <https://www.the74million.org/article/science-of-reading-push-helped-some-states-exceed-pre-pandemic-performance/>.

¹⁶ Erin Fahle et. al, Research Scientist, *The First Year of Pandemic Recovery: A District-Level Analysis*, The Harvard University Center for Education Policy and Research & The Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University (Jan. 2024), <https://educationrecoverycorecard.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ERS-Report-Final-1.31.pdf>.

¹⁷ *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*, National Reading Panel (Apr. 2000), <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf>.

¹⁸ *Why The Three-Cueing Systems Model Doesn’t Teach Children to Read*, Excel in Ed (2022), https://excellent.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ExcelinEd_FactSheet_ThreeCueingDoesNotTeachChildrenToRead.pdf.

¹⁹ Liana Loewus, *Data: How Reading Is Really Being Taught*, EducationWeek (Dec. 3, 2019), <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/data-how-reading-is-really-being-taught/2019/12>.

Teachers continue to use this disproven method of reading instruction rather than transition to the evidence-based science-of-reading framework. Science-of-reading-based reforms over the past 30 years have been met with resistance from educators because it is a more challenging instructional framework to implement and goes against the status quo.

Every time state or local leaders have tried to improve literacy through the science of reading, there has been a pattern of well-meaning veteran teachers opposing it because they have anecdotal stories that these disproven methods “work” for struggling students. There are also teachers who are set in their ways about how they want to teach reading and conduct their classroom, regardless of the evidence – anecdotal or otherwise. These teachers ignore evidence in favor of expediency.

Teachers’ unions affirm these teachers digging in their heels. Unions have historically been staunch opponents of the science of reading and have tried to obstruct reforms. They complain about how quickly they are expected to implement these reforms that are truly best for students, claim it infringes on teacher autonomy, and both demand yet resist the need for additional training.

Today, given the broad and bipartisan support that the science of reading now enjoys, unions are being forced to get on the bandwagon, but it’s still not easy. While the perspective of educators is crucial to informing education and policy decisions, we cannot allow our students to struggle and fall further behind for the sake of not inconveniencing teachers when we have evidence-based, proven solutions. We cannot delay for the comfort of adults when there are students who cannot read.

The schools of education that are training teachers also promulgate these disproven methods of literacy instruction repeatedly. Until last year, Columbia University’s Teachers College – one of the nation’s most prestigious schools of education – housed an instructional consultancy called the “Reading and Writing Project” run by Lucy Calkins. Calkins is the leading “expert” in the balanced literacy approach that relies on the three-cueing method.²⁰

Reading Recovery, an intervention program based on the three-cueing model, developed and promoted by the school of education at The Ohio State University continues to be widely used. When Ohio Governor Mike DeWine tried to move exclusively to the science of reading, he was promptly sued by an association of Reading Recovery professionals, advocates, and partners.²¹

No wonder teachers are not prepared to effectively instruct students in reading when the very schools tasked with preparing them ignore all evidence and teach outdated, disproven methods.

Pandemic-related school closures – also supported and extended by teachers’ unions – only made matters worse.²² The 2022 NAEP results showed that two decades of admittedly small progress in reading were nearly wiped out over the course of the pandemic.²³ There was a statistically significant three-point drop in average reading scores for both fourth and eighth-grade students.²⁴ The 2022 NAEP Long-Term Trend assessment for nine-year-old students showed the largest score drop in reading since 1990.²⁵

²⁰ Sarah Schwartz, *Teachers College to ‘Dissolve’ Lucy Calkins’ Reading and Writing Project*, EducationWeek (Sept. 5, 2023), <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/teachers-college-to-dissolve-lucy-calkins-reading-and-writing-project/2023/09>.

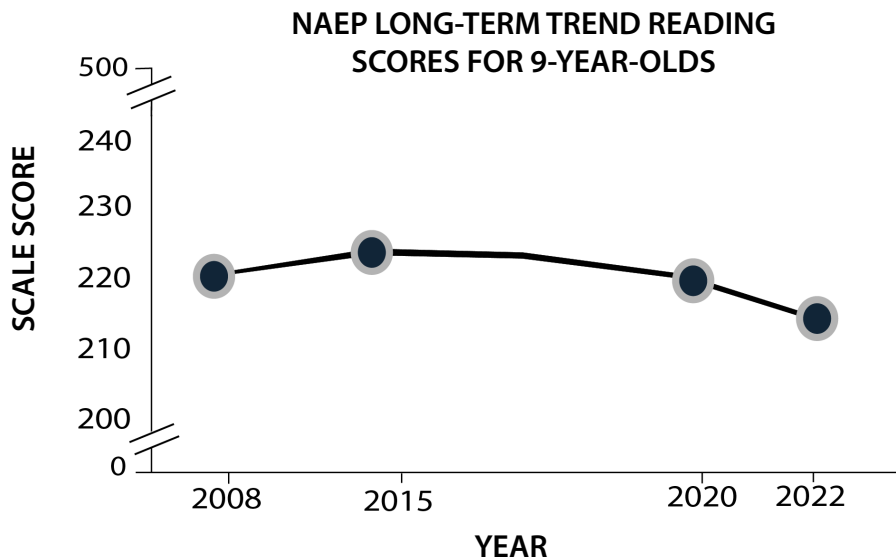
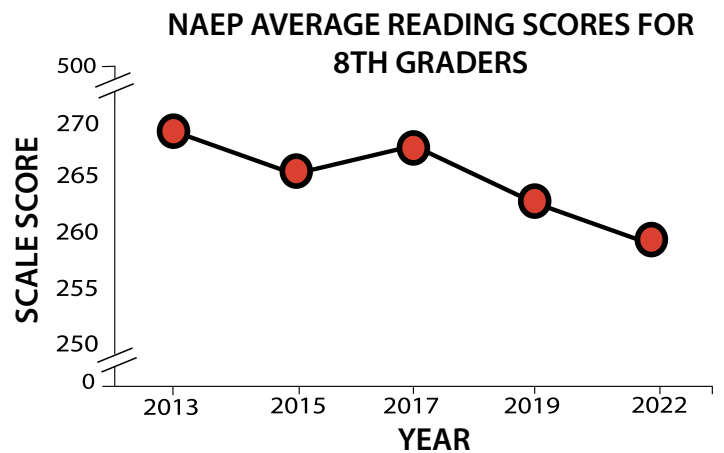
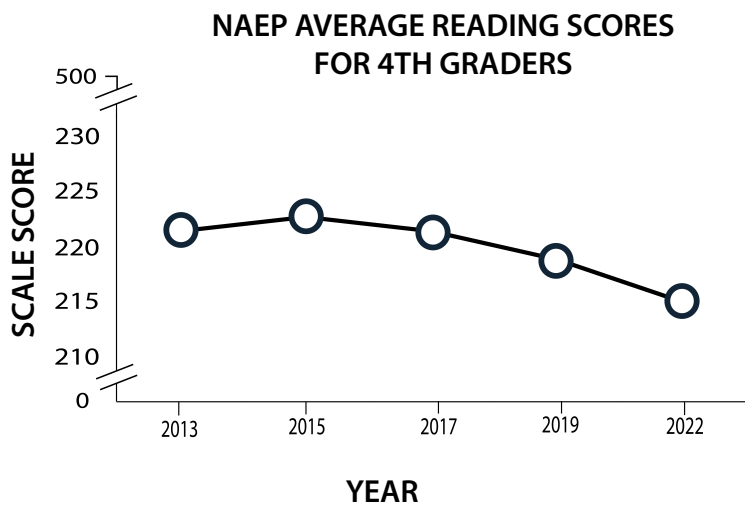
²¹ Sarah Schwartz, *Reading Recovery Sues Ohio Over Ban on ‘Cueing’ in Literacy Instruction*, EducationWeek (Oct. 18, 2023), <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/reading-recovery-sues-ohio-over-ban-on-cueing-in-literacy-instruction/2023/10>.

²² Susan Ferrechio, *Teachers Unions Worked with CDC to Keep Schools Closed for COVID, GOP Report Says*, The Washington Times (Mar. 30, 2022), <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/mar/30/republican-report-shows-teachers-unions-helped-cdc/>.

²³ Sarah D. Sparks, *Two Decades of Progress, Nearly Gone: National Math, Reading Scores Hit Historic Lows*, EducationWeek (Oct. 24, 2022), <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/two-decades-of-progress-nearly-gone-national-math-reading-scores-hit-historic-lows/2022/10>.

²⁴ *National Achievement-Level Results*, National Assessment of Educational Progress (Oct. 24, 2022), <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/>.

²⁵ *NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics*, National Assessment of Educational Progress (Sept. 1, 2022), <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltr/2022/>.



Since the pandemic, reports describe unprecedented behavior issues among students. Eighty-one percent of superintendents say that behavior concerns are worse now than in 2019 – 35 percent feel they are significantly worse.²⁶ Seventy percent of educators also feel that students misbehave more now than compared with the fall of 2019.²⁷ This steals vital instructional time from students who need it and creates hazardous work conditions for teachers.²⁸

Both the Obama and Biden administrations issued policy on discipline in schools that made it even more difficult for school leaders to address these issues – as they feel they must avoid disciplining students to ensure they are not investigated by the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights.²⁹

²⁶ 2023 *Voice of the Superintendent Survey Executive Brief*, EAB (Feb. 16, 2023), <https://pages.eab.com/2023SuperintendentSurveyExecutiveBrief.html>.

²⁷ Arianna Prothero, *Student Behavior Isn’t Getting Any Better, Survey Shows*, EducationWeek (Apr. 20, 2023), <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/student-behavior-isnt-getting-any-better-survey-shows/2023/04>.

²⁸ Daniel Buck, *Soft-on-Consequences Discipline Is Terrible For Teachers*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute (Feb. 9, 2023), <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/soft-consequences-discipline-terrible-teachers>.

²⁹ *Joint Dear Colleague Letter*, U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (Jan. 8, 2014), <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/soft-consequences-discipline-terrible-teachers>; Resource on Confronting Racial Discrimination in Student Discipline, U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (May 2023), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1585291/dl?inline>.

Eighty-one percent of teachers report that they are spending more time on social-emotional learning with their students than ever before, which takes away classroom time for academic endeavors.³⁰ While addressing the social and emotional needs of students is important, it must be in addition to and in support of academic learning. We cannot allow core instructional time to be absorbed by these other endeavors – especially given that many social-emotional learning activities lack any evidence-based research to support them.³¹

Without strong discipline and an academics-first focus in schools, students lose more and more instructional time to disruptions and outbursts. We cannot expect students to catch up without facilitating an environment where classroom time is respected and protected.

Another source of lost instructional time is chronic absenteeism. New reporting demonstrates historic levels of absenteeism – especially in schools with already low levels of achievement. In 2018, school districts with low achievement had 19 percent of students that were chronically absent. As of 2022, that number is 36 percent – a 17.2 percentage point increase. Even in high achievement districts, the rate of chronic absenteeism doubled from 10 percent to 20 percent.³²

Conversely, many tout the amazing outcomes of schools run by the Department of Defense. Even the New York Times said, “Schools for children of military members achieve results rarely seen in public education.”³³ Many are searching for the “special sauce” that makes these schools so exceptional when it is quite simple – it is the presence of, emphasis on, and value of discipline that comes from being military connected.

Addressing discipline issues and chronic absenteeism – both of which have worsened because of pandemic-related school closures and students’ trouble re-entering schools – will be a crucial part of our efforts to ensure students can read and improve academic achievement. If we want students to learn, they must be in school and in classrooms that foster learning.

The science of reading is not a silver bullet for all students’ literacy woes. Some students will still need individualized attention. It is, however, the crucial, evidence-based first step to addressing this critical moment. The science-of-reading framework is proven to be the foundation that students need to be put on the path to literacy and prevent our nation from losing an entire generation of readers.

³⁰ *TPT Survey Report: What 2,000+ Teachers Think About SEL*, Teachers Pay Teachers (May 2022), <https://blog.teacherspayteachers.com/tpt-survey-report-what-2000-teachers-think-about-social-emotional-learning/>.

³¹ Max Eden, *The Trouble with Social Emotional Learning*, House Committee on Appropriations – Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies (Apr. 6, 2022), <https://www.aei.org/research-products/testimony/the-trouble-with-social-emotional-learning/>.

³² Chronic Absenteeism: 2017-2023, Return2Learn Tracker (Oct. 23, 2023), <https://www.returntolearntracker.net/>.

³³ Sarah Mervosh, *Who Runs the Best U.S. Schools? It May Be the Defense Department.*, The New York Times (Oct. 10, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/us/schools-pandemic-defense-department.html>.

➡ Questions for Consideration

While states continue taking meaningful steps toward improve literacy instruction, more must be done to ensure that students are reading proficiently.

To that end, I pose the following questions to gain insight from stakeholders on how the federal government, and all stakeholders, can work together to improve literacy. Please submit feedback and comments for ways to support literacy reform and to ensure our students can read to Literacy@help.senate.gov by April 5, 2024.

Policy

1. What are some of the other risks to our society, in the short- and long-term, of inaction to address an entire generation of students not being proficient in reading?
2. What existing programs or funding streams are accessible from a federal and/or state perspective that would support implementation of evidence-based best practices? How can these programs be improved?
3. What other ways can federal and state government support the implementation process?
4. What federal actions (through law or regulation) might hamper the progress being made by state and local leaders?
5. What actions need to be taken by education stakeholders (parents, advocates, school leaders, educators, policymakers, etc.) to continue the momentum of literacy reform?

Beyond Policy

6. How effectively is individual student progress in reading being monitored?
7. How much of a student's success (or lack of success) is connected with the teaching method used for that student and his or her classmates?
8. What should teachers, school leaders, district officials, and school boards consider when selecting curriculum to ensure materials are faithfully aligned with evidence-based practices?
9. How can teachers' unions be encouraged to come alongside these reforms rather than resist them?
10. What role does school choice play in supporting students' literacy?
11. What are the appropriate guardrails for literacy coaching to ensure it is effective?
12. What actions can local leaders take to improve literacy?

Supporting Parents

13. What is critical for parents to understand about literacy and evidence-based practices for reading instruction?
14. What questions should parents ask teachers and school leaders to ensure their student is being taught using evidence-based methods?
15. How can parents support and bolster their child's reading skills?

Teacher Preparation

16. How are educator prep programs an essential component of successful implementation of evidence-based literacy instruction and curriculum? What actions can be taken to ensure these programs are teaching evidence-based methods?
17. What accountability metrics are most effective when assessing educator prep program curriculum to ensure incoming teachers are aligned with best practices?