



Why Reading Matters – Now More Than Ever

A CEO Action Plan to Support Improved U.S. Literacy Rates

Executive Summary

Reading is foundational for individuals to reach their full potential in the modern economy. American 3rd graders — a crucial age for ensuring a range of positive outcomes, including success in school and adult literacy — read below proficiency levels at alarming rates before the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a driving factor behind the Business Roundtable “Why Reading Matters and What to Do About It” 2016 report.¹ Learning loss experienced during the pandemic only made the problem worse, especially among low-income and minority students.

Improving literacy rates is a requirement for building a qualified workforce for the future, keeping the United States globally competitive and ensuring broader economic opportunity. In this report, Business Roundtable CEOs have provided an updated agenda to improve U.S. reading proficiency and help ensure all Americans are able to thrive in the workplace and achieve economic success.

A Workforce Challenge That Has Only Gotten Worse

Reading Is Fundamental to a Skilled Workforce

Finding qualified workers for in-demand jobs will always be a CEO priority, which is why the persistent skills gap in the American workforce continues to challenge employers and hold individuals back from reaching their full potential. This is especially true in today’s tight labor market. Over the last year, employers have had, on average, over 10.5 million jobs to fill, yet the number of unemployed persons sits at the pre-pandemic level of nearly six million.²

“If we are going to meet the constantly evolving skills demands of the future and have a robust talent pipeline, we should start by increasing 3rd grade reading proficiency. Doing so is crucial to the long-term sustainability of the U.S. economy.”

— Jim Goodnight, CEO, SAS

A focus on improving 3rd grade reading proficiency is an absolute necessity if we are to address many aspects of the skills gap over the long term. Students who develop strong reading skills at an early age are much more likely to graduate from high school and seek postsecondary education and training.³ In addition, research consistently shows that reading itself is one of the most commonly and intensively used skills in all types of jobs across the U.S. economy, including jobs that require no

education or training beyond high school.⁴ In fact, the economic returns from reading proficiently are higher in the United States than in nearly every other developed country.⁵

Moreover, the nation's emergence from the pandemic has been accompanied by permanent shifts in employment patterns, with increased demand for workers with skills and expertise in areas such as software development, network systems, logistics and supply chain management, robotics and artificial intelligence.⁶ Competency in these science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields will help students contribute in our increasingly technological world – and STEM and literacy skills go hand in hand. A student must first develop strong literacy skills in order to advance in a STEM field.⁷ Reading also plays a key role in the development of so-called “interpersonal skills” or “durable skills,” such as critical analysis, collaboration, creativity and effective communications.⁸

However, 43 million U.S. adults possess low literacy skills; nearly 20 percent of this number is classified as illiterate.⁹ If all Americans are to participate in the U.S. economy, national literacy levels have to improve – which cannot be done without a strong commitment to 3rd grade reading proficiency.

“The ability to read is one of the most intensively used skills among all types of jobs across the U.S. However, 43 million U.S. adults possess low literacy skills – with nearly 20 percent classified as illiterate. For the future of our economy, we have to improve adult literacy levels – and that starts with improving 3rd grade reading proficiency.”

— Scott Kirby, Chief Executive Officer, United Airlines

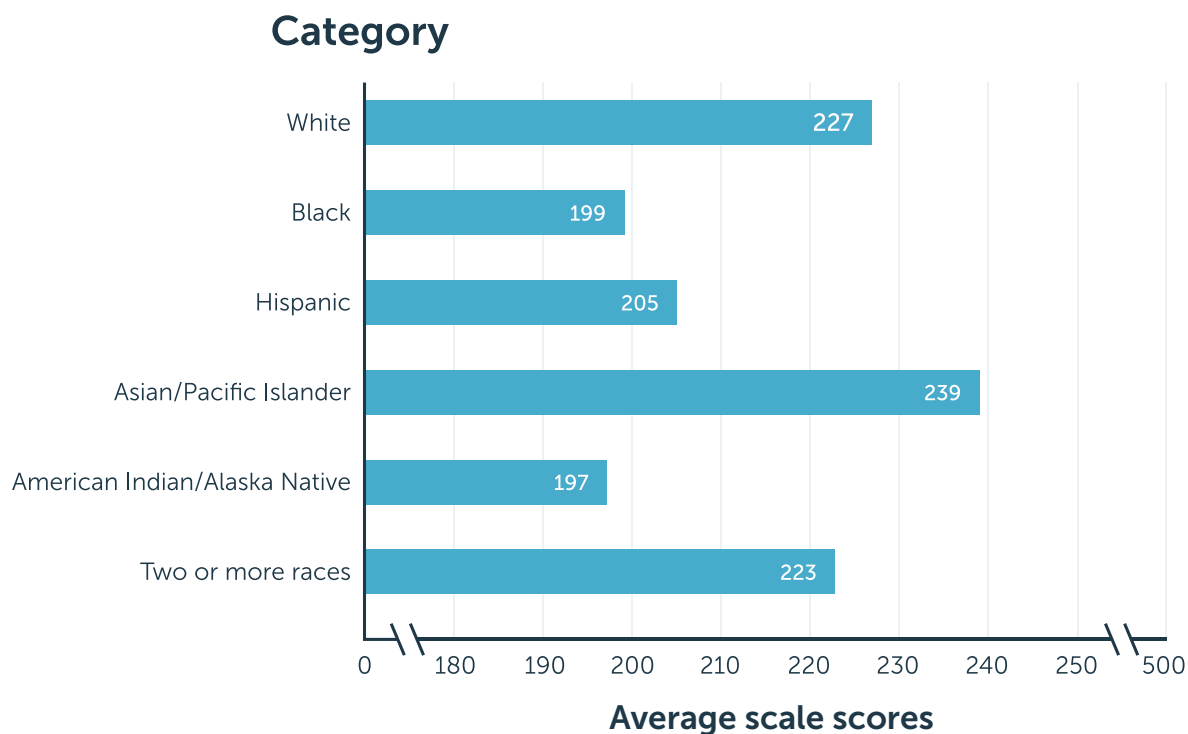
The Pandemic Made America's Early Reading Problem Worse

Even with overwhelming evidence that reading skills are foundational to success in work and life, American students have consistently underperformed on proficiency measurements – and the pandemic only compounded the problem.

The most recent (2022) National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that the average reading scores for both 4th and 8th graders decreased by 3 points as compared to 2019, with only a third of 4th graders and 31 percent of 8th graders reading at the proficient level.¹⁰ Moreover, 37 percent of 4th graders and 30 percent of 8th graders performed below the basic level (NAEP's lowest benchmark) on these latest assessments.¹¹ These results translate into the “largest pool of struggling readers since 2003 in 4th grade and since 1994 in 8th grade.”¹²

The numbers are even more troubling for students from low-income families and students of color. For both 4th and 8th grades in 2019 and 2022, Black, Hispanic and Native American students received the lowest scores, as illustrated in the chart below.¹³ The gaps in test scores between students in low-poverty and high-poverty elementary schools grew by approximately 15 percent in reading, primarily during the 2020–21 school year.¹⁴

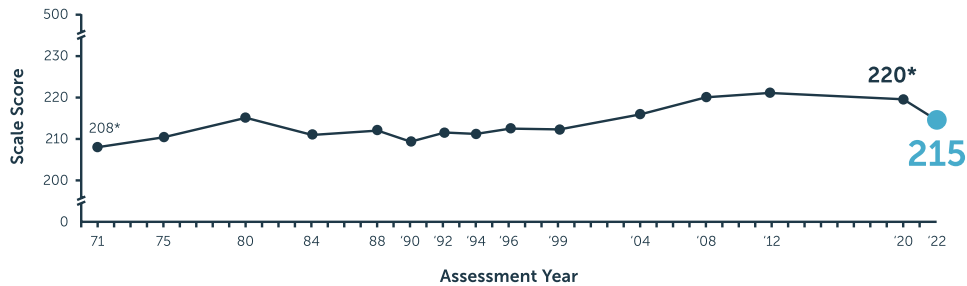
Average scale scores for grade 4 reading, by Race/ethnicity used to report trends, school-reported [SDRACE] for jurisdiction: 2022, National



Note: Black includes African American, Hispanic includes Latino and Pacific Islander includes Native Hawaiian. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin. Prior to 2011, students in the “two or more races” category were categorized as “unclassified.” The NAEP Reading scale ranges from 0 to 500. Some apparent differences between estimates may not be statistically significant.
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), 2022 Reading Assessment.

The National Center for Education Statistics conducted a special administration in 2022 of the NAEP long-term trend reading assessments for 3rd graders to examine student achievement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Average scores for these 9-year-olds declined 5 points in reading — the largest average score decline in reading since 1990.¹⁵

Reading



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics (2022)

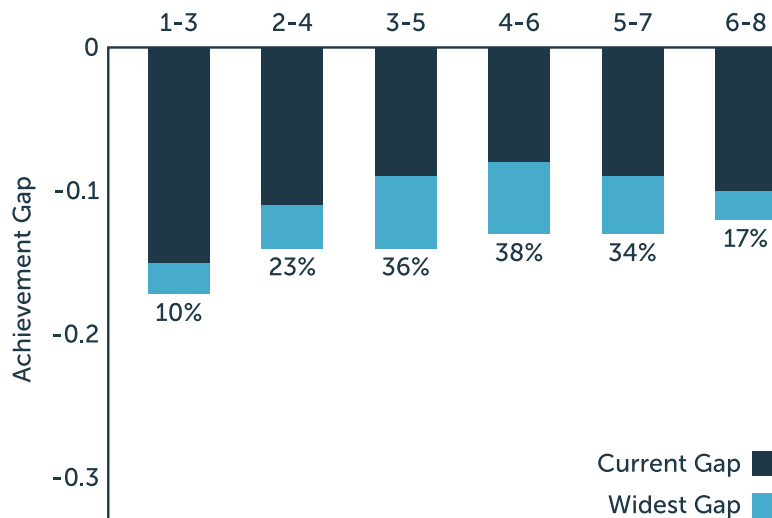
Score change between
2020 and 2022



Largest score drop
in reading since 1990

These recent NAEP scores should be viewed as a new baseline upon which to improve. As a nation, we must go beyond pre-pandemic proficiency levels in order to create the talent pipeline needed to remain globally competitive in the long run.¹⁶

Not only was there a significant decline in reading as reflected in the NAEP findings, but a study by the Northwest Evaluation Association showed 3rd graders who were kindergarteners when the pandemic began lost the most ground during COVID and have rebounded the least.¹⁷



3rd graders in 2022 are the furthest behind in reading, as depicted by the bar on the left. So far they've recovered only 10 percent of their pandemic learning losses, which were at their greatest in the spring of 2021. Older grades are making better progress in catching up.

The current achievement gaps are the difference between the pre-COVID and COVID assessment scores in fall 2022. The widest achievement gaps were generally recorded in the spring of 2021. The percentages are the change in these gaps and reflect how much students have rebounded. Source: NWEA

These findings are consistent with another recent assessment reviewing data from the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year: only 55 percent of the nation's 3rd graders were on track for learning to read, with 30 percent in need of intensive intervention and the youngest students remaining the most at risk.¹⁸

“Now more than ever, following the academic impact of the pandemic, it continues to be a priority to equip our nation's teachers with the tools they need to help our youngest students become strong readers. We need to accelerate our efforts, and teachers are key to making that happen. The future of American innovation begins with investing in the next generation.”

— Hal Yoh, Chair and CEO, Day & Zimmermann

A Proposed Plan of Action From America's CEOs

In December 2016, Business Roundtable CEOs raised an alarm about U.S. reading proficiency and offered concrete actions state and business leaders could take to reverse the trends.¹⁹ Most of those recommendations are still applicable today. Below are those recommendations, with additional actions to address the effects of the pandemic.

Six State Policy Steps to Ensure Reading Proficiency by 3rd Grade

To address this critical problem and ensure students develop the reading proficiency necessary in the modern economy, state leaders should consider a six-step policy agenda to create an aligned, coherent system of effective literacy instruction and support for their youngest students. Each state is in a different place in implementing policies to address reading and literacy, and each state's unique context will dictate the specific nature and timing of additional policy steps. Business Roundtable offers this policy blueprint to inform important ongoing policy conversations at the state level.

- 1. Expand Access to High-Quality Pre-K Learning Opportunities.** An extensive body of rigorous research demonstrates that high-quality, publicly funded pre-K programs — delivered at scale — can significantly improve student readiness for kindergarten and success in school.²⁰ Moreover, states and cities around the country have demonstrated it is possible to provide effective public pre-K programs at sustainable costs that offer significant short-term²¹ and long-term²² returns on investment.
- 2. Offer High-Quality Full-Day Kindergarten.** Students can experience lasting benefits from high-quality pre-K programs when their K-3 classrooms offer effective curriculum and instruction that intentionally aligns with and builds on learning gains from pre-K.²³ That alignment begins with

access to high-quality full-day kindergarten. An experimental study of Indiana's grant program to expand access to full-day kindergarten found that participation had a substantial positive impact on literacy skills at the end of the kindergarten year.²⁴ While students in general benefited, assignment to full-day kindergarten had an especially large impact for Hispanic students and students with low literacy skills. In fact, the impact for Hispanic students was large enough to close the Hispanic-white literacy gap in kindergarten by 70 percent.²⁵

- 3. Use Student Assessments and Data Systems to Track Student Progress.** Regularly assessing student progress enables pre-K and K–3 teachers to identify reading problems early enough to intervene effectively, plan and adjust their teaching according to how well the class is responding to reading instruction and inform parents about how children are progressing.²⁶ Including assessment results in secure data systems can provide parents and other stakeholders with reports on how students are meeting reading expectations over time and how to improve the state's policies and programs.²⁷
- 4. Equip Educators in Pre-K–Grade 3 to Help Students Become Strong Readers.** Educators in pre-K through (at least) 3rd grade must be equipped with a firm understanding of how young students develop literacy skills based on the "science of reading," along with proven strategies to ensure reading proficiency and engage families as partners.²⁸ Principals also need expertise in the same areas to lead schoolwide efforts to ensure reading proficiency by the end of 3rd grade.²⁹
- 5. Require Systematic Interventions for Struggling Readers in Grades K–3.** Even in classrooms in which students benefit from a strong curriculum and skilled teaching, some students will need more intensive instruction to keep up with grade-level expectations for reading. States should consider implementing policies that require school districts to provide interventions and supports when students fall behind in reading and to notify and involve parents at the earliest opportunity. When it comes to combating the toll the pandemic took on reading achievement, high-impact tutoring programs³⁰ have shown to have larger positive effects than other scientifically based interventions — though extended learning, summer reading programs and class size reduction have also shown to be effective strategies for mitigating reading score drops in the wake of the pandemic.³¹
- 6. Coordinate Governance of Pre-K and Grades K–3 to Promote Efficiency and Maximize Impact.** Improving educational opportunities for young readers cannot happen without strong state-level leadership, administration and oversight — in other words, effective and accountable governance of programs and services that support early literacy development and reading.³²

“States that are incorporating research and evidence – such as Mississippi and North Carolina – on how children learn to read are seeing actual progress on sharpening early literacy skills. Aligning with this ‘science of reading’ should be a model for all states to ensure America is preparing its students with the skills businesses need to sustain strong economic growth into the future.”

— Thomas C. Nelson, Chairman, President and CEO, National Gypsum Company

The “Science Of Reading”: How Two States Prepared Teachers for Reading Instruction

While many states have pursued a statewide approach to aligning teacher preparation to the “science of reading,” Mississippi and North Carolina provide two noteworthy examples.³⁴

Mississippi

In 2013, Mississippi passed the Mississippi Literacy-Based Promotion Act, requiring that students be proficient in reading by the end of 3rd grade and be taught in accordance with the “science of reading.” The State Department of Education then developed the Mississippi Comprehensive Literacy Plan, a three-prong approach to increasing early literacy, starting in early 2014:

- First, Mississippi developed curriculum for its colleges of education tied to the five elements of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension), earning Mississippi the highest score in the National Council on Teacher Quality’s review of states’ teacher preparation programs.³⁵
- Second, Mississippi undertook immersive, multi-year training for the state’s current teachers, principals and university faculty so that they all would understand the science.
- Finally, Mississippi recruited and trained 80 literacy coaches to mentor and work side-by-side with teachers in elementary classrooms.³⁶

Mississippi was the only state to demonstrate a significant improvement in 4th grade reading between the 2017 and the 2019 NAEP assessments.³⁷ In addition, the state improved its national ranking in reading proficiency from 49th in 2013 to 21st place in 2022.³⁸

North Carolina

Following the approach implemented in Mississippi, in 2021, North Carolina passed the Excellent Public Schools Act, directing that over 44,000 pre-K through 5th grade teachers and principals be intensely trained in the “science of reading” – the same training used in Mississippi.

Second, the legislation required all public and private colleges of education to revise their curricula and instructional practices to align to the “science of reading,” with implementation beginning in the 2022-23 school year.

Third, the North Carolina General Assembly, in 2022, appropriated recurring state funds to begin implementing a teacher coaching model involving peer-to-peer mentoring.

Early data shows that, even with the learning loss experienced during the pandemic, literacy growth in North Carolina is outpacing other states across the country in kindergarten through 2nd grade.³⁹ Further, in early 2023, North Carolina had a higher percentage of students – nearly 28,000 – on track in reading at the start of the school year compared to the prior school year.⁴⁰

How CEOs Can Take Action

Business Roundtable CEOs can play a proactive role in promoting state policy agendas that strengthen 3rd grade reading proficiency.

- **Provide CEO and Company Support.** CEOs’ and their companies’ support for increasing literacy from pre-K through 3rd grade can make a significant difference. Actions may include making the business case for improved literacy rates to state policymakers, advocating the pre-K through 3rd grade reading agenda, encouraging support among peer CEOs and business leaders in the state and supporting employees who take their own initiative to get involved.
- **Support Advocacy.** Connect with in-state advocacy groups that have the infrastructure to conduct intensive and ongoing work in support of the pre-K through 3rd grade reading agenda.³³ Consider providing financial support to influential organizations or coalitions that make improving early literacy a priority.
- **Leverage Philanthropic Investments.** Strategic philanthropic investments, with a focus on programs and practices with a strong evidence base in sound research, can help bring some of the recommendations in this report to scale.
- **Offer Expertise.** Make technical expertise available to states and other organizations implementing

some of the strategies described in this report, such as efforts to build data systems that can track and report on students' progress in reading.

- **Participate in Leadership Opportunities.** Some states convene public-private governance or advisory groups to help steer decision-making for pre-K through 3rd grade programs and policies. CEOs can lend valuable leadership expertise and experience by joining those groups, and they can work through them to ensure that states maintain a strong focus on literacy and reading proficiency.

Conclusion

The U.S. literacy crisis can no longer be ignored. A skilled workforce and thriving society require that individuals be literate, and the time to make sure people can read starts early, from pre-K through the 3rd grade. Business Roundtable CEOs are committed to solving this persistent problem and urge state leaders to do the same.

Appendix

1. *Why Reading Matters and What to Do About It: A CEO Action Plan to Support Improved U.S. Literacy Rates*, Business Roundtable (Dec. 2016), https://s3.amazonaws.com/brt.org/BRT_Why_Reading_Matters_12192016.pdf.
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