

Fact Sheet

January 2026

Early Literacy in Utah

By Andrea Thomas Brandley, Senior Education Analyst

Reading proficiency in the early grades plays a critical role in Utah students' academic trajectories and future opportunities. The data below highlight current early literacy outcomes and evidence on what improves reading success.

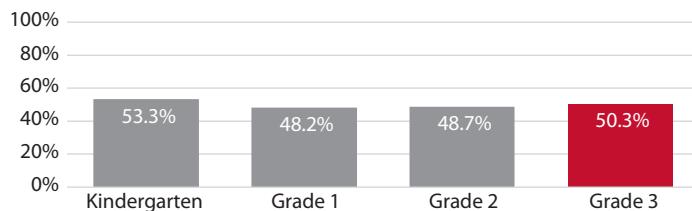
1

What is Utah's Early Literacy Challenge?

Many Utah students do not read proficiently by third grade.

- Half of third graders read on grade level¹** – In 2025, 50.3% of third graders reached grade-level proficiency, with similar rates seen in earlier grades (Figure 1).
- Some student groups and schools face even lower proficiency rates** – Reading proficiency varies sharply by student group and geography. English-language learners, students with disabilities, Hispanic/Latino students, and economically disadvantaged students reach grade-level reading at even lower rates (Figure 2). Across school districts, third-grade reading proficiency ranges from below 30% to above 70% (Figure 3).
- Early literacy spans multiple systems and stages** – Children begin developing literacy skills before school, and once in school, responsibility spreads across families, teachers, principals, districts, educator preparation programs, and state and community leaders. Hundreds of classrooms and schools operate at different starting points with varying capacity and supports.

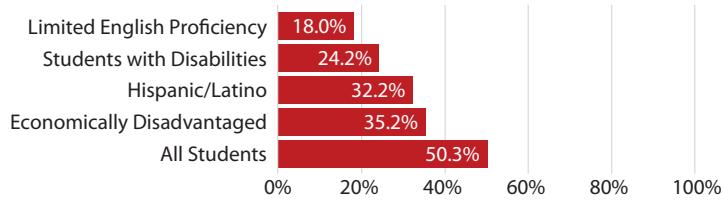
Figure 1: Utah K-3 Reading Proficiency, 2025



Note: Measured as the share of students scoring above benchmark on the end of-year Acadience reading assessment.

Source: Utah State Board of Education

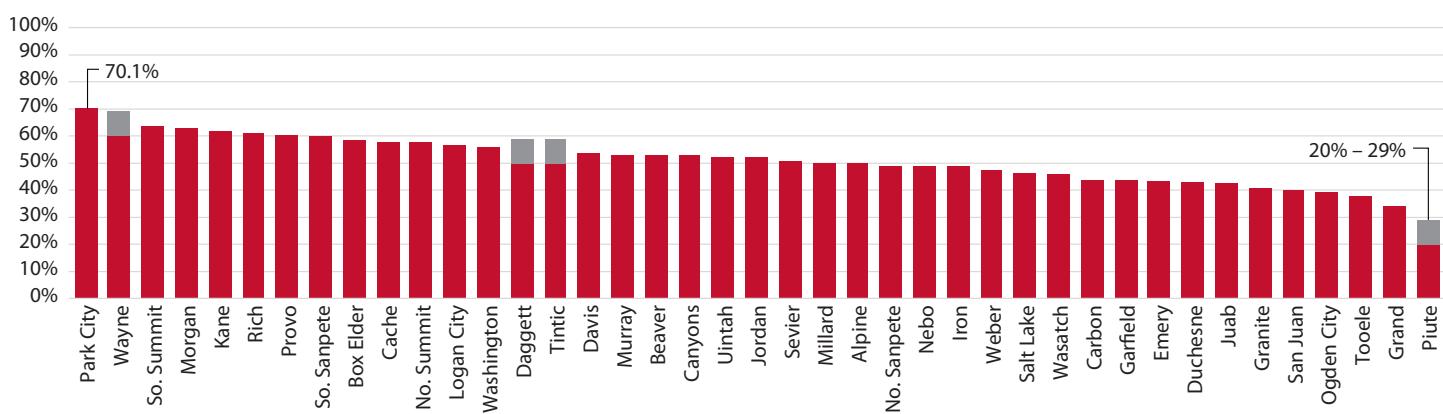
Figure 2: Utah 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency by Student Category, 2025



Note: Measured as the share of students scoring above benchmark on the end of-year Acadience reading assessment.

Source: Utah State Board of Education

Figure 3: Utah 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency by School District, 2025



Note: Measured as the share of students scoring above benchmark on the end of-year Acadience reading assessment. Because Wayne, Daggett, Tintic, and Piute have very small third-grade cohorts, the state reports their proficiency as a range shown in the gray segments. Actual proficiency falls within this interval.

Source: Utah State Board of Education

INFORMED DECISIONS™

2

Why Does Early Literacy Matter?

Early literacy underpins academic success and broader social and economic outcomes.

- **Early reading provides a foundation for all later learning** – Third grade represents a pivot point where students transition from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. Students who cannot read proficiently by the end of third grade face increased challenges learning content across other subject areas.
- **Third-grade reading predicts long-term success**
 - Students who read proficiently by third grade are more likely to stay on grade level and graduate from high school, and experience better long-term health and well-being (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Share of U.S. Students Not Graduating High School by 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency



Note: Based on a national database of 3,975 students born between 1979 and 1989. Measured the share of students not graduating high school by age 19.

Source: Hernandez, 2011

- **Literacy strengthens the workforce and communities**

– At the population level, literacy supports workforce readiness, economic productivity, and civic participation. Adults with stronger literacy skills earn higher wages, experience lower unemployment, and engage more fully in their communities (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Relationship Between Adult Literacy Skills and Positive Life Outcomes

Increased Likelihood of Adults with High Literacy Reporting Positive Outcomes Compared to Adults with Low Literacy

High Wages	2.9x
High Levels of Political Efficacy	2.6x
Participation in Volunteer Activities	2.6x
High Levels of Trust in Others	2.3x
Being Employed	2.2x
Good to Excellent Health	2.1x

Note: International Average. Odds ratios are adjusted for age, gender, educational attainment and immigrant and language background. High literacy includes adults scoring at level 4/5, while low literacy includes adults scoring at or below level 1 literacy on the Survey of Adult Skills.

Source: 2012 Survey of Adult Skills. Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).

3

What Improves Early Literacy Outcomes?

Early literacy improvement depends on evidence-based strategies implemented well and sustained over time.

- **Early experiences build readiness** – Children experience rapid brain development in their earliest years (ages 0 to 5). Frequent shared reading and rich oral language exposure strengthen vocabulary and foundational skills that prepare children for formal reading instruction.
- **Improvement depends on comprehensive coordinated supports** – Effective early literacy systems combine high-quality instruction and materials, strong educator support, early identification, targeted intervention, early learning experiences, and family and community engagement. These supports reinforce one another and work best when implemented together.

- **Implementation drives results** – States, districts, and schools that improve reading outcomes align curriculum, teaching practices, assessment, and intervention—and carry them out consistently over time. Policy helps enable change, but durable improvement comes from sustained, high-fidelity implementation.

Endnote

1. There is no single national definition of what it means for a student to read “on grade level” or “proficiently.” In this fact sheet, reading on grade level and reading proficiency are used interchangeably and refer to Utah’s definition under State Board of Education Rule R277-406. Utah’s definition reflects a deliberately high standard, aligned with the skills students need to succeed as academic demands increase. Under this rule, a third-grade student is considered to be reading on grade level if the student scores above benchmark and meets or exceeds a score of 405 on the end-of-year benchmark reading assessment.

*For full analysis and references, see the complete report, *The Future Is Watching: Understanding Utah’s Early Literacy Landscape*, available at gardner.utah.edu.*