

**Andrea Thomas Brandley**  
Senior Education Analyst

# The Future Is Watching: Understanding Utah's Early Literacy Landscape

Nearly half of Utah's current young students do not read at grade level. Research shows that this can be improved with evidence-based instruction and coordinated support.

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# The Future Is Watching: Understanding Utah's Early Literacy Landscape

## Analysis in Brief

About half of Utah's K-3 students do not meet grade-level reading expectations, a trend that mirrors national patterns. Early literacy development spans multiple stages and systems, from early childhood through the early grades. Research across early childhood development and reading instruction indicates that strong early literacy supports future academic, economic, and civic outcomes, and that nearly all children can learn to read with systematic instruction and timely support. Early experiences—including language exposure, shared reading, and access to high-quality early learning—shape the skills children bring into school, while K-3 instruction and intervention help build the foundation needed for lifelong learning.

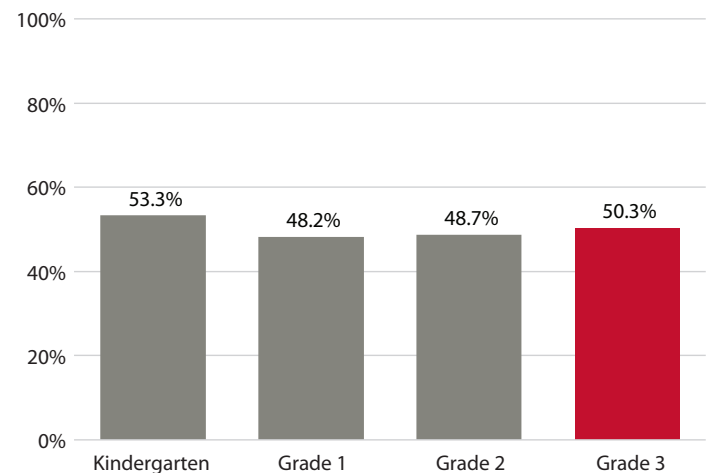
SB 127: Early Literacy Outcomes Improvement (2022, General Legislative Session) aims to strengthen these supports, and the state's progress depends on coherent, consistent implementation across settings.

### Key Findings

- **Half of third graders read on grade level** – In 2025, 50.3% of third graders reached grade-level proficiency, with similar rates seen in earlier grades. These rates indicate that roughly half of Utah students progress through the early grades without reaching expected reading proficiency.
- **Outcomes vary widely** – District-level reading proficiency ranges from below 30% to above 70%, and large gaps exist for English-language learners, students with disabilities, Hispanic/Latino students, and economically disadvantaged students.
- **Literacy shapes life outcomes** – Students who read proficiently by third grade progress through coursework more effectively, graduate at higher rates, and experience stronger long-term employment and health outcomes.

- **Early experiences matter** – Children experience rapid brain development in their earliest years. Frequent shared reading and strong early language exposure support vocabulary and emergent literacy skills that prepare children for formal reading instruction.
- **Nearly all children can learn to read** – Intervention studies show that only 1–3% of students continue to struggle when they receive systematic, evidence-based instruction and targeted interventions.
- **Implementation drives improvement** – Research from states with reading proficiency improvement show that aligned curriculum, assessment, coaching, and early learning supports—implemented consistently over time—produce meaningful gains in reading achievement.

### 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

*Literacy development begins well before children enter school and continues across the early grades. Once in school, reading outcomes reflect conditions shaped by families, classrooms, school leadership, districts, educator preparation programs, and state and community supports. Because these systems operate at different levels of capacity, improving early literacy at scale is inherently complex. Aligned systems of support shape students' literacy trajectories.*

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The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute thanks and acknowledges the Clark and Christine Ivory Foundation for underwriting this research report. The Foundation’s support reflects a commitment to strengthening early literacy by supporting schools, educators, and administrators and recognizing the shared responsibility of families, communities, and public systems in helping children succeed.

## Introduction

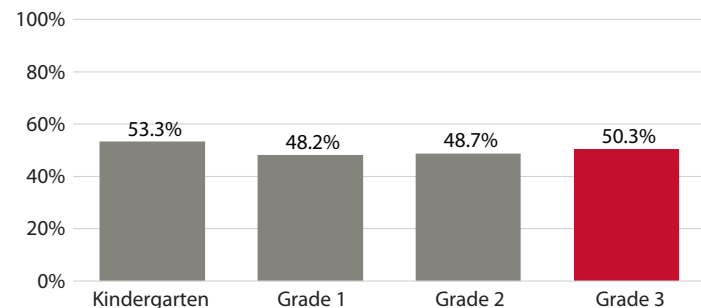
Children shape Utah's future, and their ability to read proficiently by the end of third grade plays a central role in the opportunities they have throughout school and into adulthood. Strong early reading skills support later learning in every subject, influence high school and postsecondary outcomes, and contribute to Utah's long-term economic and civic health.<sup>1</sup>

Statewide K–3 data show that many Utah students enter upper elementary grades without meeting grade-level expectations (outcomes vary across grades, schools, and student groups). National trends reflect similar patterns, underscoring that early literacy challenges exist across the country.<sup>2</sup>

Literacy development begins well before children enter school and continues across the early grades. Once in school, reading outcomes reflect conditions shaped by families, classrooms, school leadership, districts, educator preparation programs, and state and community supports. Because these systems operate at different levels of capacity across schools and communities, improving early literacy at scale is inherently complex. Aligned systems of support shape students' literacy trajectories.<sup>3</sup>

Utah's recent policy actions, including SB 127 (2022), aim to strengthen these foundations and improve early reading outcomes across the state.<sup>4</sup>

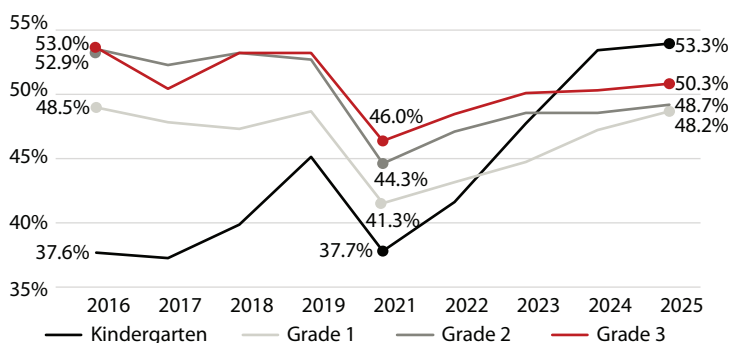
**Figure 1: Utah K-3 Reading Proficiency, 2025**



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 K-3 Reading Proficiency, 2016-2025**



Note: Measured as the share of students scoring above benchmark on the end-of-year Acadience reading assessment. There is no 2020 data due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: Utah State Board of Education

## What is Utah's Early Literacy Challenge?

Utah's literacy results show that only about half of K-3 students read on grade level, indicating that many of these young students struggle to read. Reading proficiency rates vary across schools, districts, and student groups.

- **Low proficiency across grades** – In 2025, 53.3% of kindergarteners, 48.2% of first graders, 48.7% of second graders, and 50.3% of third graders met grade-level expectations. These rates indicate that roughly half of Utah students progress through the early grades without reaching expected reading proficiency (Figure 1).
- **Strong kindergarten gains** – Kindergarten proficiency increased from 37.7% in 2021 to 53.3% in 2025, a 15 percentage point gain that aligns with the expansion of full-day kindergarten. Kindergarten proficiency rates far exceed pre-pandemic levels.
- **Slower recovery in later grades** – Reading proficiency growth slows in each subsequent grade. From 2021 to 2025, Grade 1 proficiency increased by 7 percentage points, while Grades 2 and 3 rose by about 4 percentage points (Figure 2). By 2025, Grade 1 proficiency returned to its 2019 level, while Grades 2 and 3 remained below pre-pandemic rates.
- **Wide district variation** – The share of third graders reading on grade level ranged from less than 30.0% in Piute School District to 70.1% in Park City School District, the only school district meeting the statutory goal of more than 70.0% proficiency in 2025 (Figure 3).
- **Gaps across student groups** – In 2025, 18.0% of third grade students with limited English-language proficiency, 24.2% of students with disabilities, 32.2% of Hispanic/Latino students, and 35.2% of economically disadvantaged students met grade-level expectations, compared with 50.3% of all third-grade students (Figure 4). These gaps appear early and persist across grades.
- **Poverty correlates with proficiency** – Schools with higher shares of economically disadvantaged students generally show lower reading proficiency rates (Figure 5).
- **High-poverty schools can achieve strong results** – Among schools where most students are economically disadvantaged, proficiency ranges from below 20% to above 70%, showing that some schools serving students with greater needs achieve substantially higher outcomes (Figure 5).

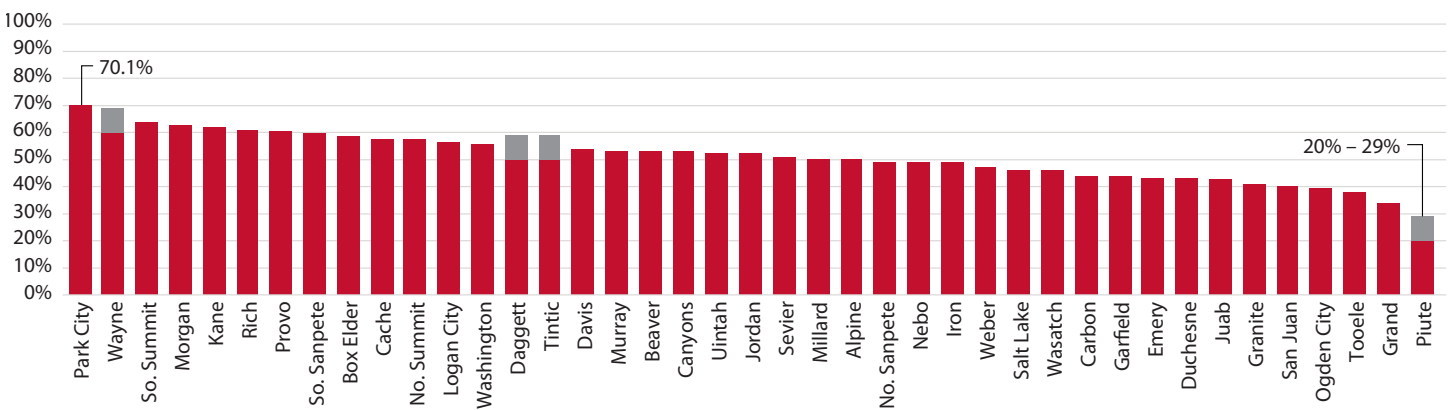
## Reading on Grade Level

There is no single national definition of what it means for a student to read “on grade level” or “proficiently.” In this report, 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.

## Nearly All Children Can Learn to Read

Reading research consistently shows that nearly all children can learn to read. Peer-reviewed studies of early interventions for struggling readers find that only 1–3% of students continue to experience severe reading difficulty when they receive consistent, evidence-based support.<sup>5</sup> Student demographics or background characteristics did not predict who succeeded in these interventions. This indicates that a child’s circumstances do not limit their capacity to become a proficient reader when instruction is well designed and delivered effectively.

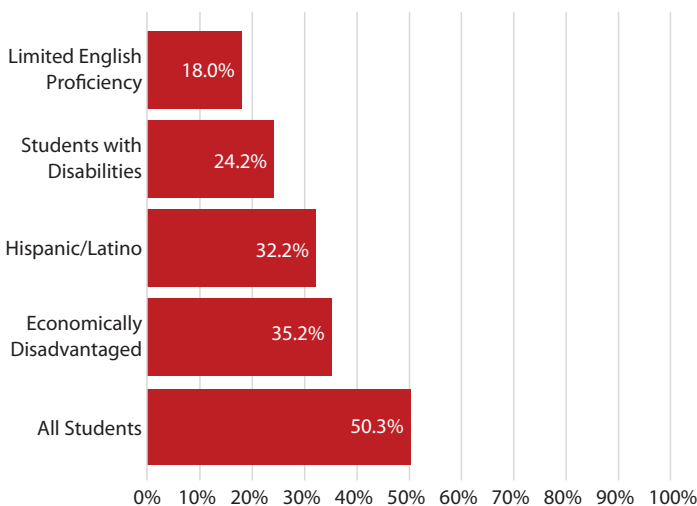
**Figure 3: Utah 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency by School District, 2025**



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

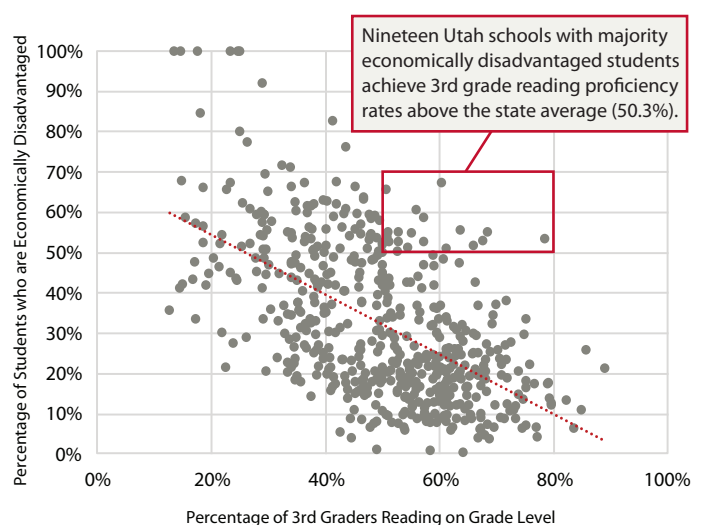
**Figure 4: Utah 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency by Student Category, 2025**



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 5: Utah 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency and Percentage of Economically Disadvantaged Students by School, 2025**



Note: Measured as the share of students scoring above benchmark on the end-of-year Acadience reading assessment. Excludes 106/650 schools with third grade cohorts too small to provide precise estimates

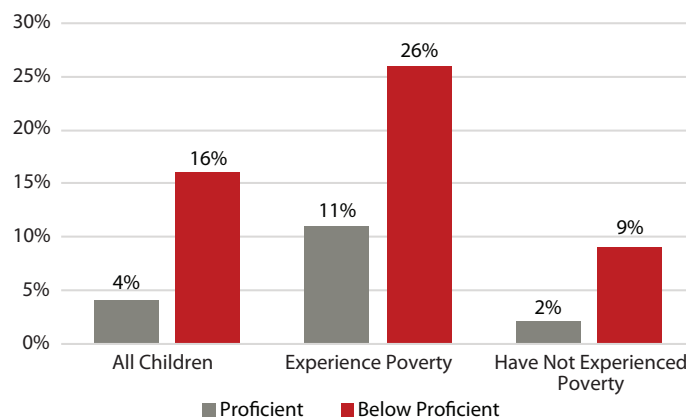
Source: Utah State Board of Education

## Why Does Early Literacy Matter?

Strong early literacy fuels educational success, economic growth, and civic vitality. Children who master reading by third grade gain a foundation for lifelong learning and those who do not often struggle to catch up over time. These early skills support both individual opportunity and the strength of communities.

- **Stronger long-term educational outcomes** – Students who read proficiently by third grade stay on grade level, succeed in later coursework, graduate from high school, and enroll in college at higher rates.<sup>6</sup> Students who do not read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely not to graduate high school.<sup>7</sup> These rates are higher for students who also experience poverty (Figure 6).
- **Greater economic prosperity** – Early reading proficiency shapes later job prospects and earnings.<sup>8</sup> Adults with higher literacy skills have higher employment rates and higher earnings than adults with low literacy (Figure 7). A more literate population strengthens the economy by expanding the skilled workforce, boosting productivity and innovation, and generating higher tax revenues.
- **Better health and well-being** – Literacy enables people to better understand health information, access health care, manage chronic conditions, and navigate health systems.<sup>9</sup> Adults with stronger reading skills report better overall health than those with lower literacy rates (Figure 7).
- **Stronger communities and democracy** – Literacy strengthens community engagement and civic participation, foundations of a healthy democracy. Adults with stronger literacy skills report higher levels of volunteering, voting, and social trust (Figure 7).<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 6: Share of U.S. Students Not Graduating High School by 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency**



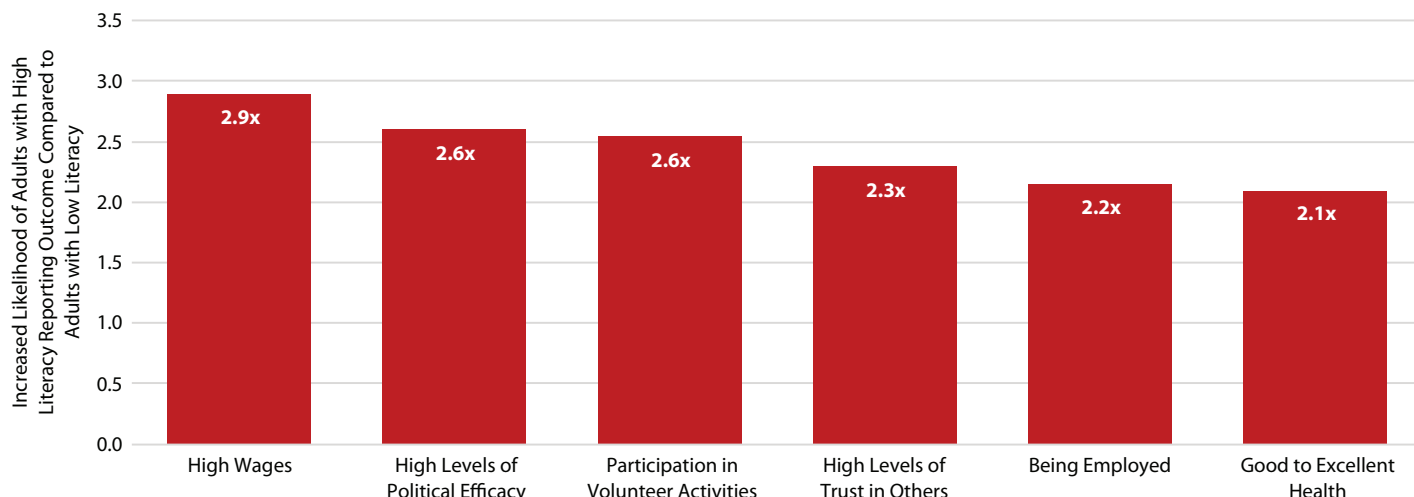
Note: Based on a national database of 3,975 students born between 1979 and 1989. Measured the share of students not graduating high school by age 19. The “Experienced Poverty” category includes children who lived in a family with an income below the federal poverty threshold for at least one of the five years the survey was conducted. Source: Hernandez, 2011

### Foundation for Lifelong Learning

Learning to read requires early mastery of phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.<sup>11</sup> Because these foundational skills develop rapidly in the early grades, K–3 represents a critical window for effective intervention.<sup>12</sup> Third grade represents a pivot point where students transition from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*.<sup>13</sup> Students who cannot read proficiently by the end of third grade face increased challenges learning content across other subject areas.<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 7: 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*



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).





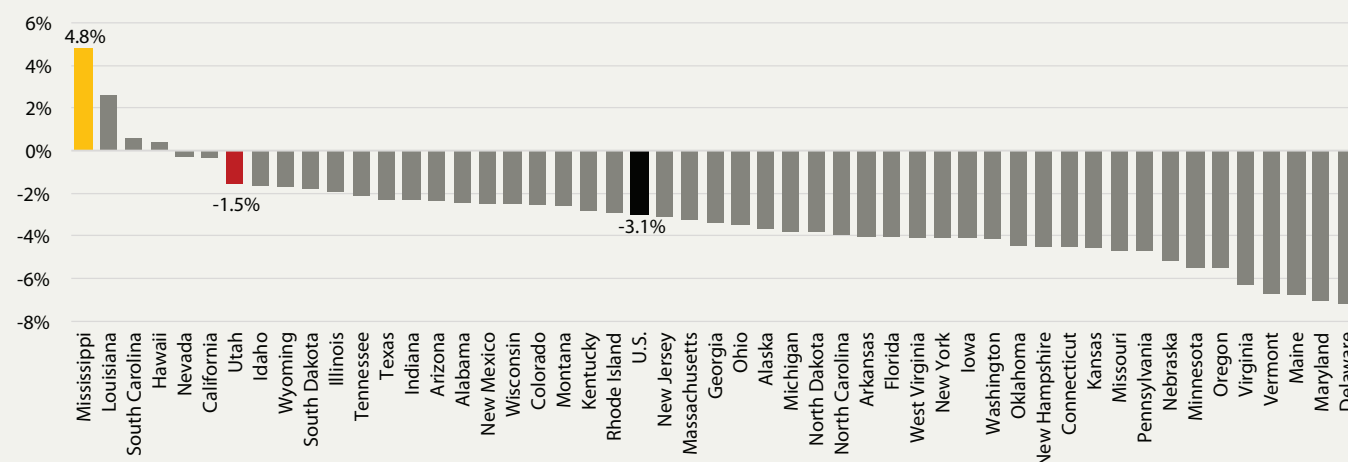
## Mississippi's Reading Gains

Mississippi showed sustained improvement in fourth-grade reading scores over the past decade, a period when most states experienced declines (Figure 11). The state ranked 49th nationally in 2013, rose to 29th in 2019, and reached 9th in 2024. These gains are particularly notable given Mississippi has the largest share of economically disadvantaged children in the country (Figure 12).

Mississippi's progress reflects a long-term, comprehensive effort rather than a single policy change.<sup>15</sup> Over roughly ten years, the state aligned curriculum, expanded statewide

coaching, provided sustained professional learning, strengthened early screening and intervention, implemented third-grade retention, and invested in early learning supports. A recent quasi-experimental study found that Mississippi's improvement is associated with this multi-year, coordinated approach and the state's emphasis on implementation quality, rather than any individual reform acting alone.<sup>\*16</sup> States exploring literacy improvement often point to Mississippi to illustrate how a coherent, persistent focus on early reading can improve outcomes.

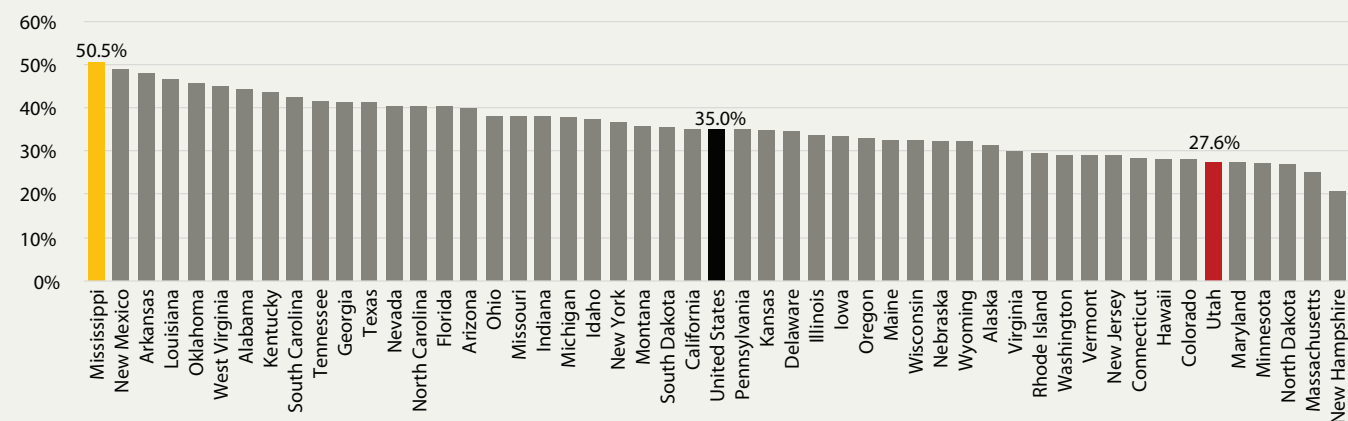
**Figure 11: Percent Change in Average 4th Grade Reading Scores by State, 2013-2024**



Note: As Measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 4th Grade Reading Assessments

**Figure 12: Share of Children at 200% of the Federal Poverty Line or Below by State, 2023**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2023 5-year Estimates

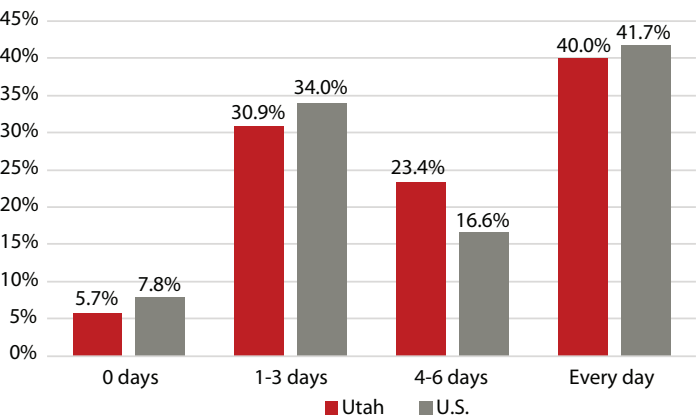
\*Some critics initially argued that retention explained Mississippi's gains, but analyses indicate that retention alone does not produce the patterns seen in National Association of Education Progress (NAEP) data and cannot account for Mississippi's sustained improvement.<sup>17</sup>

# How Do Early Experiences (Birth to Age 5) Shape Literacy Development?

Early literacy development begins long before children enter kindergarten. During the first five years of life, rapid brain growth, early language exposure, and everyday interactions with caregivers lay the foundation for later reading success. These early experiences can help build children’s vocabulary, oral language development, and readiness to learn to read.

- **Rapid early brain development** – Children form neural connections at extraordinary rates in the first five years of life, making early experiences—conversation, shared reading, and play—especially influential in shaping language and literacy pathways (Figure 9). Exposure to rich language helps children recognize words and make sense of what they read once they begin formal reading instruction.<sup>18</sup>
- **Caregiver engagement** – Daily reading, storytelling, and conversational back-and-forth contribute directly to vocabulary and oral language growth.<sup>19</sup> In Utah, 40.0% of parents report that their child is read to every day, while 36.6% report reading to their children three days per week or fewer (Figure 13). One study estimates that children who are read to frequently in early childhood may hear over 1.4 million more words from shared storybook reading by kindergarten than children who are rarely or never read to.<sup>20</sup>

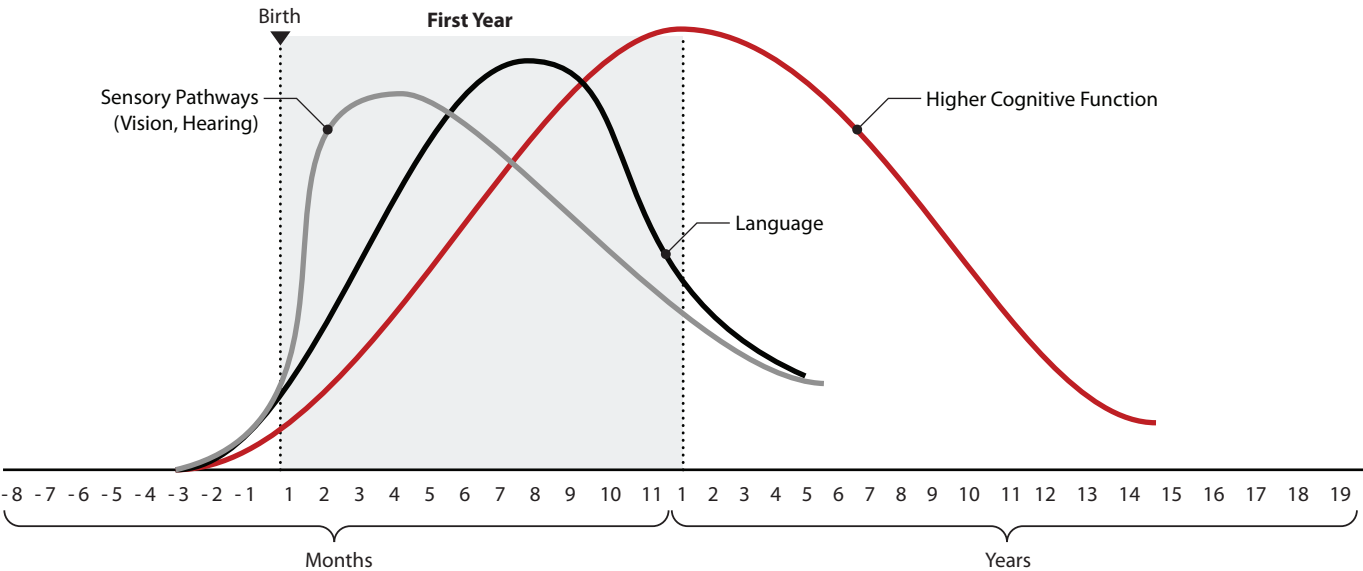
**Figure 14: Number of Days per Week Children were Read to by a Parent or Family Member in Utah and the U.S., 2023**



Note: Based on survey responses to the question: During the past week, how many days did you or other family members read to this child, age 0-5 years?  
Source: The Child & Adolescent Measurement Initiative National Survey of Children's Health

- **High-quality early learning** – Access to enriching early learning environments (including pre-K programs) strengthens vocabulary, emergent literacy skills, and kindergarten readiness, particularly for children with fewer early literacy experiences at home.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 13: Development of Neural Connections for Sensory, Language, and Cognitive Functions Over Time**



Source: Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University (2024). Graph adapted from Nelson, 2000.

## Impacts of Third-Grade Retention

Third-grade reading retention policies generally require students who do not meet a minimum reading proficiency standard to remain in third grade and receive additional instruction rather than be promoted to the next grade. Many states have incorporated third-grade reading retention policies into early literacy legislation.

A large body of research has examined these test-based retention policies and show that most retained students experience reading gains, though long-term outcomes are mixed. That said, more recent evaluations occurred in states that provide extensive supports alongside retention, making disentanglement of reading retention and intensive interventions difficult. The strongest evidence suggests that the supports students receive when flagged for retention—not retention alone—primarily drive the improvement.

- **Short-term reading gains** – Retained students in Mississippi, Indiana, and Florida saw large and immediate gains in English Language Arts, with Mississippi showing especially strong effects for Black and Hispanic students.<sup>22</sup> A policy in Chicago also increased third grade outcomes when retention was paired with mandatory summer programming.<sup>23</sup>
- **Mixed long-term outcomes** – Indiana’s reading gains persisted through middle school and Florida’s gains persisted through grade 10 when compared to same-grade peers. Florida students saw increases in students’

grade point averages and decreases in remedial course taking; however, they did not see an increase in the probability of students graduating high school.<sup>24</sup> While some studies of retention find elevated dropout risk (particularly retention in older grades), recent evaluations of third-grade retention policies implemented with academic supports do not show similar effects.<sup>25</sup>

- **Neutral nonacademic effects** – Evaluations in Mississippi and Indiana found no significant effects of retention on attendance, disability identification, or disciplinary incidents through middle school.<sup>26</sup> Recent causal studies also do not detect any consistent social-emotional harms.<sup>27</sup>
- **Limits of retention** – Studies attempting to isolate the effects of retention find that it does not improve reading scores on its own.<sup>28</sup> States with gains in reading proficiency typically pair retention policies with substantial academic support—assignment to a high-performing teacher, individualized reading plans, extended literacy blocks, tutoring, and access to summer programs—often beginning in kindergarten. These supports, rather than retention itself, appear to primarily drive the observed improvements. In Michigan, for example, simply identifying students for support and providing targeted interventions led to meaningful gains even when the students were not ultimately retained.<sup>29</sup>

## What Improves Early Literacy Outcomes?

Research identifies a focused set of approaches that reliably strengthen early reading outcomes. Effective systems combine high-quality instruction, strong educator support, targeted interventions, and enriched early learning environments. Dedicated school leadership and implementation structures ensure these practices are carried out consistently across classrooms and over time.

- **Evidence-based instruction and materials** – Structured literacy (systematic phonics, phonological awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing) paired with high-quality, evidence-aligned curriculum produces consistent gains in early reading.<sup>30</sup>
- **Strong teacher support** – Effective systems invest in teacher knowledge through aligned pre-service training, ongoing science-of-reading professional development, and coaching and mentoring that supports high-fidelity instruction.<sup>31</sup>
- **Data-driven identification** – Regular K–3 screening and progress monitoring helps schools identify students early, match instruction to need, and guide placement into tiered supports.<sup>32</sup>
- **Intensive interventions** – Evidence-based small-group or one-on-one intervention by trained and knowledgeable educators—delivered frequently and focused on systematic foundational skills (typically 20–40 minutes, 3–5 times per week)—produces meaningful gains for students.<sup>33</sup> Summer programs also show promise in supporting struggling readers.<sup>34</sup>
- **Early learning and family engagement** – High-quality preschool and early learning experiences strengthen vocabulary, phonological awareness, and emergent literacy. Daily reading, rich conversation, and responsive interactions at home further build the language foundation essential for early reading success.<sup>35</sup>
- **Leadership and implementation** – Strong school and district leadership, protected instructional time, aligned schedules, and consistent use of evidence-based practices create the conditions for high-quality literacy instruction. Effective systems monitor implementation, support teachers, and ensure instructional coherence across grades, which helps sustain improvement in early reading outcomes.<sup>36,37</sup>

## Conclusion

Utah's early literacy data, together with national trends, show both the scale of the challenge and the importance of early reading for later educational, economic, and civic outcomes. Research demonstrates that nearly all children can learn to read with effective instruction and timely support. Results typically emerge from a combination of coordinated strategies—high-quality early learning experiences, preparation and support for educators, evidence-aligned classroom instruction, and targeted interventions—and from the contributions of families, schools, and communities working together.

Fortunately, Utah has already taken significant steps to strengthen the foundations of early literacy. As the state continues to implement its policies, the experiences of states

that have significantly improved early reading outcomes highlight the importance of coherent systems and sustained implementation over time.

Strong early reading skills shape children's opportunities in school, work, and community life. Students who read proficiently in early grades move through later coursework with greater confidence, experience stronger long-term educational and economic outcomes, and participate more fully in civic life. As more Utah children develop these skills, the state will benefit from a better-prepared workforce, stronger communities, and a more prosperous future.

## SB 127: Early Literacy Outcomes Improvement

SB 127: Early Literacy Outcomes Improvement (2022) established Utah's current framework for strengthening early grade reading. The law aligns expectations across curriculum, assessment, professional learning, teacher preparation, and family engagement to support more robust and consistent early literacy practices statewide.

### Key Components of SB 127:

- **Statewide Goal** – Established a statewide target of 70% third-grade reading proficiency by 2027.
- **Science of Reading Expert Panel** – Established a panel of experts to advise the Utah State Board of Education on implementation of the science of reading, review curriculum and assessments, support professional learning, and collaborate with educator preparation programs.
- **Professional Learning in Early Literacy** – Requires K–3 educators and leaders to complete state-approved early literacy professional learning (LETRS or equivalent). Provides grants to support this training and to offer additional science-of-reading-aligned professional learning opportunities.
- **Curriculum Requirements** – Requires each school district and charter school to adopt science-of-reading-aligned core curriculum and intervention programs, as advised by the Science of Reading Panel.
- **Literacy Coaching** – Provides, trains, and assigns early literacy coaches to schools with low reading achievement to support K–3 teachers through job-embedded coaching, data analysis, and implementation of evidence-based instructional practices.
- **Benchmark Assessments** – Approves and requires a statewide benchmark reading assessment in grades 1–6 at the beginning, middle, and end of the year, with results reported to parents. USBE Board Rule R277-406 further requires kindergarten students to participate in this assessment.
- **Supports for Students Below Benchmark** – Requires schools to administer diagnostic assessments, provide specific and individualized intervention or tutoring, supply evidence-informed core materials and evidence-based intervention materials, and inform parents about at-home activities and extended-day or summer intervention options when benchmark assessments indicate a student is lagging. Students will be progress monitored to ensure intervention is effective.
- **Educator Preparation Program Alignment** – Requires teacher preparation programs to teach the science of reading, prepare candidates for and require passage of an approved literacy preparation assessment, hire faculty with science-of-reading expertise (supported with matching funds), and participate in ongoing monitoring and improvement efforts.
- **Online Repository** – Develops and maintains a statewide digital repository of science-of-reading instructional resources for teachers, leaders, families, and educator preparation programs.
- **Community Engagement Supports** – Partners with private businesses or nonprofits to provide home-use, age-appropriate books to students in qualifying schools. Develops and promotes a statewide literacy website with resources to help families support reading at home.
- **Partnerships for Student Success Grants** – Continues and expands grant opportunities for cross-sector partnerships focused on improving early literacy and related student outcomes.
- **Change Management Professional Learning** – Requires elementary principals, principal supervisors, LEA leaders, and LEA literacy specialists to complete professional learning in change management by 2027 to support consistent, sustained implementation of early literacy practices.

State and district implementation of SB 127 continues in phases, reflecting the time required for the state board of education, schools, districts, and preparation programs to adopt new materials, strengthen training, and build capacity. Research shows that the impact of early literacy reforms depends not only on policy design but also on consistent, high-quality implementation, underscoring the importance of continued attention to fidelity, monitoring, and support.<sup>38</sup>

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