

Measuring Early Literacy Progress in Utah

A review of Utah’s three most prominent early literacy measures reveals the state continues to face early literacy challenges. Strong early literacy skills remain essential to student success. Students who read proficiently by third grade will more likely succeed academically, graduate from high school, and experience stronger long-term economic and civic outcomes.¹ As Utah works toward a statewide goal of 80% of third-grade students reading on grade level by 2030, understanding measurement of that goal and how other measures complement it provides a broader understanding of literacy progress.

No single assessment fully captures literacy outcomes. Utah uses several measures—including Acadience Reading, RISE assessments, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—to evaluate student reading performance. Each serves a different purpose and provides different information about student learning. A recent change to Utah’s definition of “reading on grade level” illustrates the importance of understanding what these measures capture, how they differ, and what they reveal about literacy progress over time.

What Assessments Does Utah Use to Measure Early Literacy?

Utah uses multiple assessments to measure reading achievement (Table 1). Acadience Reading measures fundamental reading skills, identifies K-3 students who may need additional support, and monitors progress over time. RISE English Language Arts measures student proficiency in grades 3-8 relative to Utah’s academic standards. NAEP Reading assesses a representative sample of students and provides an independent measure of long-term reading trends, allowing comparisons across states and over a longer period.

Together, these assessments provide a broader picture of literacy outcomes and inform state policymaking.

How Does Utah Define Reading on Grade Level?

Utah defines “reading on grade level” using benchmark categories from the Acadience Reading assessment (Table 2). Students receive a score that places them into one of four benchmark categories: Well Below Benchmark, Below Benchmark, At Benchmark, and Above Benchmark.

Table 1: Utah Early Literacy Assessments

Assessment	Purpose	Grades	Frequency
Acadience Reading	Early identification and progress monitoring	K-3	Beginning, middle, end of year
RISE English Language Arts	Achievement relative to Utah academic standards	3-8	Annual
NAEP Reading	Long-term trend monitoring and interstate comparison	4, 8, and 12	Periodic*

*Approximately every two years

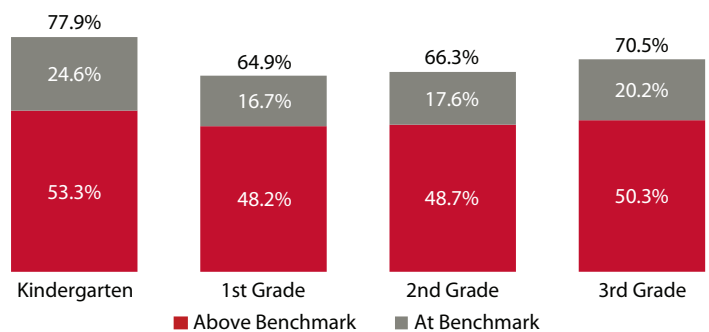
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute based on Utah State Board of Education and National Assessment of Educational Progress assessment documentation

Table 2: Acadience Reading Benchmarks

Acadience Category	At or Above Benchmark (Current Definition)			
	Well Below Benchmark	Below Benchmark	At Benchmark	Above Benchmark (Prior Definition)
Score Range	0-279	280-329	330-404	405+
Likelihood of students meeting future literacy benchmarks	10-20%	40-60%	70-85%	90-99%

Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute and Acadience

Figure 1: Utah K-3 Reading Proficiency, 2025

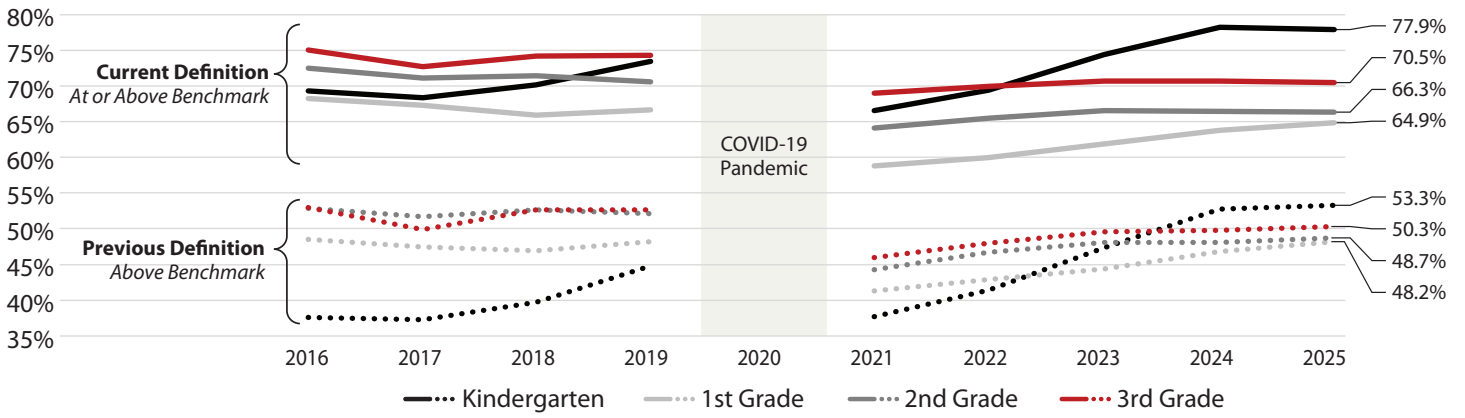


Note: Measured as the share of students scoring at or above benchmark on the end-of-year Acadience reading assessment.

Source: Utah State Board of Education

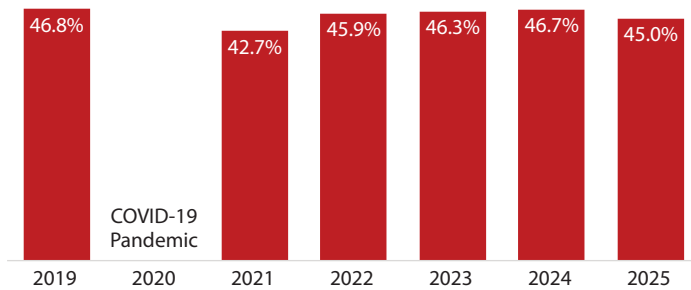
Prior to 2026, Utah defined reading on grade level as scoring **above benchmark** on the end-of-year Acadience assessment. During the 2026 General Session, S.B. 241 updated the definition to include students scoring **at or above benchmark**. The updated definition increased the share of third-grade students classified as reading on grade level from 50.3% to 70.5% in 2025, though student performance remained unchanged (Figure 1).

Figure 2: Utah K-3 Reading Proficiency, 2016-2025



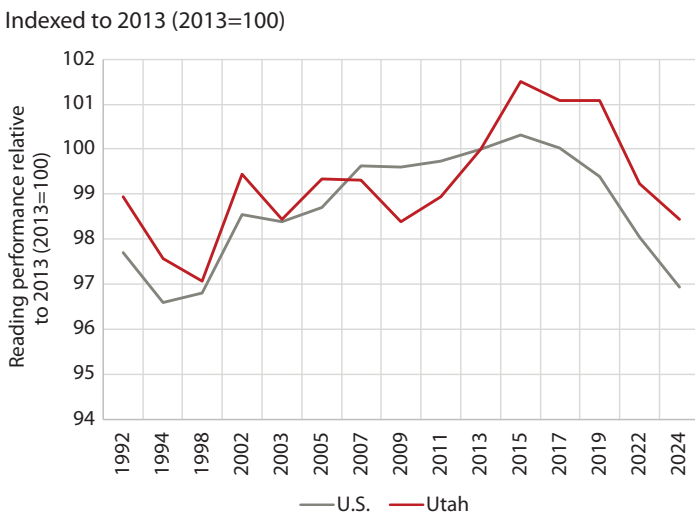
Note: Historical trends include both definitions: the share of students scoring 'above benchmark' (prior definition) and 'at or above benchmark' (current definition) on the end-of-year Acadience reading assessment. No 2020 data exist due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
Source: Utah State Board of Education

Figure 3: RISE English Language Arts Third-Grade Proficiency, 2019-2025



*The 2025 RISE ELA assessment reflects revised English language arts standards. As a result, readers should interpret prior year comparisons with caution.
Note: Measured as the share of students scoring proficient on the RISE English language arts assessment. No 2020 data exist due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
Source: Utah State Board of Education

Figure 4: Fourth-Grade Reading Trends in Utah and the U.S., 1992-2024



Note: Scores as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), indexed to 2013 (2013=100) to emphasize changes over time rather than absolute score levels. The 1992 and 1994 assessments did not permit accommodations.
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

Because reading ability develops along a continuum, no single cutoff perfectly distinguishes students who are or are not proficient readers. Different thresholds emphasize different objectives, such as identifying students currently meeting benchmark expectations or identifying students with a higher likelihood of future success.

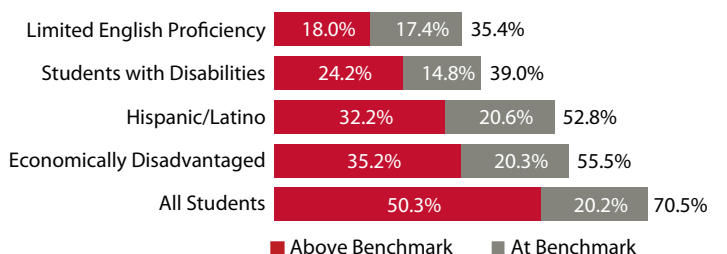
What Do Statewide Literacy Measures Show?

Because no single measure fully captures literacy outcomes, examining multiple indicators over time can help with understanding progress. Confidence in a trend increases when benchmark assessments, state assessments, and national assessments point in the same direction. When they diverge, additional analysis can help explain why.

What Does Acadience Show?

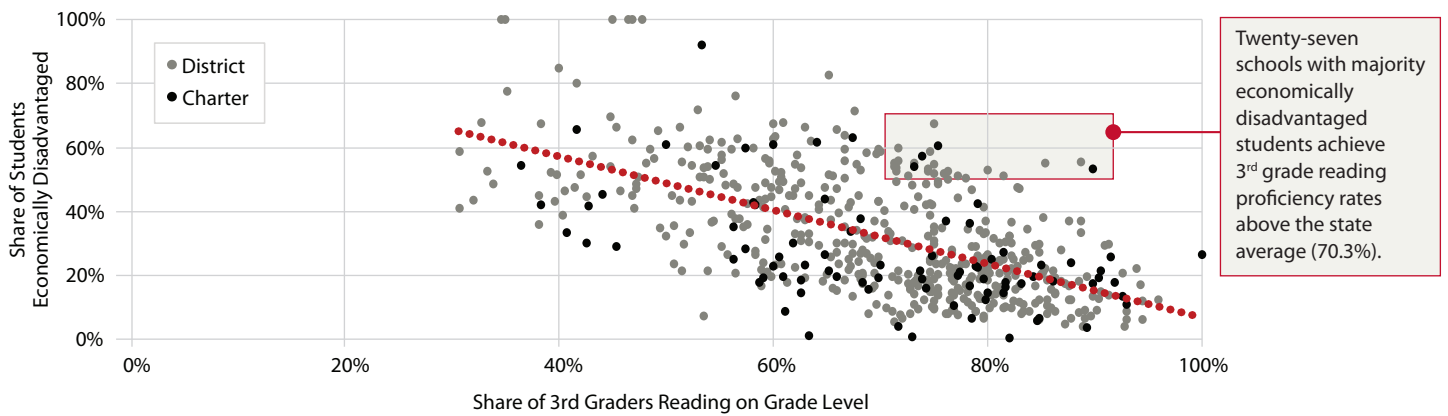
Kindergarten reading proficiency increased substantially over the past several years, aligned with the expansion of full-day kindergarten. In contrast, grades 1 through 3 recorded much smaller gains. Third-grade proficiency remained essentially unchanged between 2023 and 2025, holding at approximately 70% under the current definition. Although students recovered some pandemic-era losses, progress slowed in recent years and challenges remain.

Figure 5: Utah Third-Grade Reading Proficiency by Student Category, 2025



Note: Measured as the share of students scoring at or above benchmark on the end-of-year Acadience reading assessment.
Source: Utah State Board of Education

Figure 6: Utah 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency and Percentage of Economically Disadvantaged Students by School, 2025



Note: Measured as the share of students scoring at or above benchmark on the end-of-year Acadience reading assessment. Excludes 99/650 schools with third-grade cohorts too small to provide precise estimates.

Source: Utah State Board of Education

What Does RISE Show?

Third-grade RISE proficiency nearly recovered from pandemic-era declines but did not exceed pre-pandemic levels in 2025. Recent results closely resemble those observed five years ago, suggesting little sustained improvement over time. Utah’s adoption of new English language arts standards and performance thresholds in 2025 further complicates year-to-year comparisons.

What Does NAEP Show?

While Utah generally scores above the national average in fourth-grade reading, both Utah and the nation have experienced declining performance over the past decade. Utah’s reading achievement peaked around 2015 and then generally moved downward. These trends suggest that many of Utah’s literacy challenges emerged before the pandemic and reflect broader long-term concerns about reading achievement.

Taken together, these measures suggest uneven progress and persistent early literacy challenges. While some indicators show gains—particularly in kindergarten literacy—others point to stagnation or long-term declines. Viewed collectively, the results suggest that Utah continues to face literacy challenges.

Why Look Beyond Statewide Averages?

Statewide averages provide a useful summary of literacy outcomes, but do not capture how achievement varies across students, schools, and communities. Looking beyond overall proficiency rates helps identify where challenges persist and where success occurs.

Endnotes

1. See Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute. (2026). The Future is Watching: Understanding Utah’s Early Literacy Landscape. <https://d36oiwf74r1rap.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/EarlyLiteracy-Jan2026-Final.pdf>

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In 2025, 70.5% of Utah third-grade students scored at or above benchmark on the end-of-year Acadience assessment. Students with limited English proficiency (35.4%), students with disabilities (39.0%), Hispanic/Latino students (52.8%), and economically disadvantaged students (55.5%) show considerably lower proficiency rates.

Variation also exists across schools. Schools serving larger shares of economically disadvantaged students generally report lower literacy outcomes. However, among schools where a majority of students qualify as economically disadvantaged, reading proficiency ranges from roughly 30% to nearly 90%. This variation indicates that some schools achieve strong literacy outcomes despite serving students with greater challenges.

Examining achievement gaps and school-level variation offers additional insight into where progress occurs and where challenges remain.

How Will We Know If Utah Improves?

Utah’s statutory literacy goal provides a clear benchmark for measuring progress: by 2030, the state aims for 80% of third-grade students to score at or above benchmark on the end-of-year Acadience reading assessment. This measure establishes a common target and allows policymakers, educators, and families to track progress over time.

At the same time, using the array of indicators available—including Acadience, RISE, NAEP, achievement gaps, and school-level outcomes—can provide a broader understanding of literacy progress. Together, these measures help illuminate where challenges persist and whether Utah students are developing the reading skills needed to succeed in school and beyond.

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