

WHITEPAPER

THE READINESS CRISIS

Why K–12 Leaders Must Move from Reactive Remediation to Foundational Readiness

A White Paper for Superintendents, Curriculum Leaders, Early Learning Directors, and Community Impact Partners





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the country, K–12 systems are working harder than ever to improve literacy outcomes. Districts are investing in high-quality curriculum, intervention blocks, tutoring, summer learning, MTSS frameworks, instructional coaching, family engagement, and assessment systems.

Yet too many children still enter kindergarten without the language, literacy, and learning foundations they need to thrive. Too many students reach third and fourth grade without strong reading proficiency. Too many middle school students struggle to apply literacy across content areas. And too many districts are forced to spend increasing amounts of time, staffing, and money on remediation after gaps have already formed.

This is the readiness crisis.

The readiness crisis is not simply a kindergarten problem. It is not only a preschool access problem. It is not only a reading achievement problem. It is a system-design problem.

It is the gap between what children need from birth through age 8 and what public education systems are typically organized to provide before children enter school.

The research and national data point to a clear pattern:

- 1. **Readiness begins before kindergarten.** Children develop language, vocabulary, oral comprehension, phonological awareness, self-regulation, and early learning behaviors long before they enter school.
- 2. **Readiness is uneven.** In 2022–2023, 64.6% of U.S. children ages 3–5 were considered “Healthy and Ready to Learn,” meaning approximately 35.4% were not fully on track across key readiness domains. [1]
- 3. **Early learning access remains incomplete.** In 2024–2025, state-funded preschool served 9% of 3-year-olds and 37% of 4-year-olds nationally. [2]
- 4. **Later reading achievement remains weak.** On the 2024 NAEP reading assessment, only 31% of fourth-grade students performed at or above NAEP Proficient. The national Grade 4 reading score was 2 points lower than 2022 and 5 points lower than 2019. [3]

5. **Readiness predicts later achievement.**

While there is not one nationally valid correlation coefficient comparing kindergarten readiness to third-grade reading proficiency across all 50 states, longitudinal state research confirms the connection. In Washington State, students who were kindergarten-ready in literacy had 1.62 times greater odds of meeting third-grade ELA standards than students who were not kindergarten-ready in literacy. [4]

Districts need an upstream readiness infrastructure that begins at birth, equips families as first educators, connects community partners, strengthens K–3 literacy, extends through Grade 8, and provides data leaders can use to prove impact.

The conclusion for K–12 leaders is direct: districts cannot wait until third grade to solve third-grade reading. They cannot wait until kindergarten to build kindergarten readiness. And they cannot rely on remediation alone to close gaps that began years earlier.

1. What Is the Readiness Crisis?

The readiness crisis is the gap between when children begin developing the foundations for literacy and when public systems typically begin coordinated support.

Children do not begin preparing for kindergarten on the first day of school. They begin developing readiness through years of language exposure, vocabulary growth, oral language, story comprehension, interaction, movement, social-emotional development, and caregiver-supported learning.

Yet many formal district systems are structured around school entry. Kindergarten becomes the first point of systematic observation, screening, instruction, and intervention for many children.

By then, readiness gaps are no longer emerging.

They are already present.



Definition

The **readiness crisis** is a preventable system gap in which children’s foundational language, literacy, cognitive, physical, and social-emotional skills develop before kindergarten, while most district resources, data systems, and intervention models begin after kindergarten entry.

This creates a downstream burden on schools, teachers, intervention teams, families, and budgets.

2. The Crisis Begins Before Kindergarten

Children arrive at kindergarten with years of accumulated experiences. They have heard different amounts of language, interacted with different numbers of books, had different opportunities to build vocabulary, and experienced different levels of access to early learning, adult conversation, routines, and support.

Readiness includes more than early academic knowledge. It includes:

- Oral language
- Vocabulary
- Listening comprehension
- Early print awareness
- Phonological awareness
- Self-regulation
- Fine motor development
- Social-emotional development
- Health and physical development
- Curiosity and engagement
- Family-supported learning routines

The National Survey of Children’s Health measures school readiness across five domains: Early Learning Skills, Social-Emotional Development, Self-Regulation, Motor Development, and Health. In 2022–2023, 64.6% of U.S. children ages 3–5 were considered “Healthy and Ready to Learn,” meaning they were on track in four to five domains without needing support in any domain. [1]

That also means approximately one-third of young children were not fully on track by this national readiness measure.

For K–12 leaders, this creates an important strategic implication:

Kindergarten readiness is not created in kindergarten.

It is built through the cumulative experiences children have before they enter school.



Child Development Timeline	What Is Happening for Children	Typical System Response
Birth–Age 3	Rapid language, brain, relationship, motor, and sensory development	<i>Limited district reach</i>
Ages 3–4	Vocabulary, oral language, early literacy behaviors, self-regulation, social development	<i>Uneven preschool access</i>
Kindergarten	Formal school entry, screening, first districtwide visibility	<i>Intervention often begins</i>
Grades 1–3	Foundational reading, phonics, fluency, comprehension, writing	<i>MTSS, tutoring, remediation</i>
Grades 4–8	Reading to learn, writing, content literacy, real-world application	<i>Consequences of earlier gaps become more visible and expensive</i>



Key Insight
The readiness gap often forms upstream, but the system response is usually downstream.

3. Readiness Is a Predictor of Later Reading Achievement

One of the most important reasons the readiness crisis matters is that readiness is connected to later reading achievement.

A common leadership question is whether there is a measurable correlation between the percentage of children who are kindergarten ready and the percentage of children who later reach third-grade reading proficiency.

The answer is nuanced:

The relationship is clearly positive, but there is not one nationally valid correlation coefficient that can be responsibly reported across all 50 states.

This is because kindergarten readiness and third-grade reading proficiency are not measured in a consistent, comparable way nationwide.

Kindergarten readiness varies by state. Some states use formal kindergarten entry assessments. Others use literacy screeners, developmental indicators, PreK assessments, or locally selected tools. In 2023–2024, 27 states required districts to formally assess kindergarten readiness, while other states used different approaches. [5]

Third-grade reading proficiency also varies by state because each state uses its own assessment, proficiency cut scores, and accountability definitions. As a result, “proficient” in one state does not necessarily mean the same thing as “proficient” in another.

The closest nationally comparable reading indicator is Grade 4 NAEP reading. NAEP is administered consistently across states, but it measures fourth grade, not third grade. In 2024, only 31% of fourth-grade students nationally performed at or above NAEP Proficient in reading. [3]

NAEP Proficient should not be interpreted as the same thing as state-defined grade-level proficiency. However, the trend still matters. National fourth-grade reading performance has weakened, and too many students are reaching upper elementary school without strong reading proficiency.



What Longitudinal Evidence Shows

Although there is not one single national state-by-state correlation number, longitudinal state research confirms that kindergarten readiness is a strong predictor of later reading outcomes.

A Washington State study matched 43,458 students from the 2015–2016 kindergarten cohort to their 2018–2019 third-grade assessment results. The study found that kindergarten readiness predicted whether students met third-grade standards, even after controlling for student characteristics. Students who were kindergarten-ready in literacy had 1.62 times greater odds of meeting third-grade ELA standards than students who were not kindergarten-ready in literacy. [4]

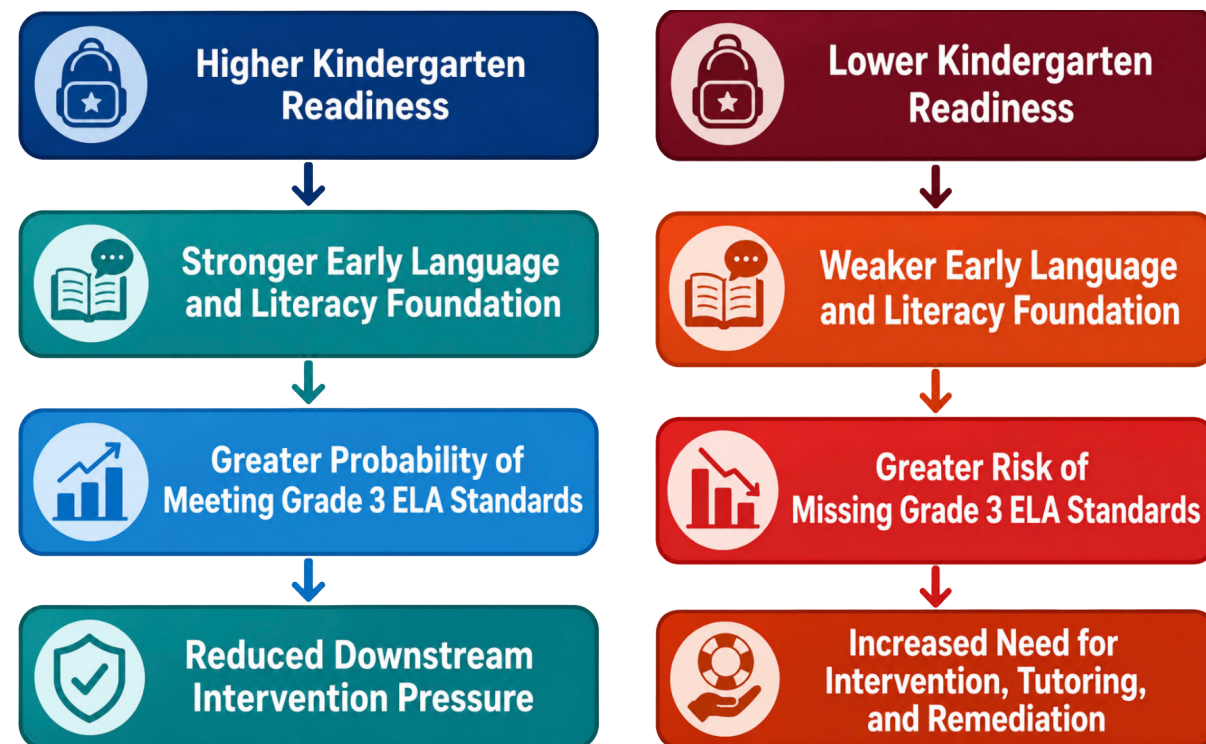
The same study found that readiness in other domains mattered as well. Kindergarten readiness in math and cognitive development also predicted third-grade ELA outcomes, showing that reading proficiency is connected to broader readiness development, not literacy skills alone. [4]

For district leaders, the meaning is clear.

Readiness is not a soft early childhood measure.

It is an early predictor of third-grade reading success.

Evidence Source	What It Shows	Leadership Meaning
National Survey of Children’s Health	64.6% of children ages 3–5 were Healthy and Ready to Learn in 2022–2023	<i>Readiness is uneven before school entry</i>
NAEP Grade 4 Reading	31% of fourth graders were at or above NAEP Proficient in 2024	<i>Too few students reach strong reading performance after the K–3 years</i>
Washington State longitudinal study	Kindergarten-ready students in literacy had 1.62x greater odds of meeting third-grade ELA standards	<i>Readiness is a meaningful predictor of later reading success</i>



Leadership Takeaway

Districts should not wait until Grade 3 to address Grade 3 reading. They should plan backward from Grade 3 to kindergarten, PreK, and Birth–Age 3 language development.

4. Preschool Access Is Still Uneven

High-quality preschool can be a powerful readiness lever, but access remains incomplete.

NIEER reported that in the 2024–2025 school year, state-funded preschool enrollment reached nearly 1.8 million children nationally, including 37% of 4-year-olds and 9% of 3-year-olds. [2]

This means that many children are still outside state-funded preschool before kindergarten. While some children participate in Head Start, private preschool, childcare, family childcare, or other community-based programs, access varies widely by state, income, geography, work schedule, program availability, transportation, and language needs.

For K–12 leaders, this matters because districts are increasingly accountable for kindergarten readiness, early literacy, third-grade reading, and long-term academic outcomes. But many children arrive at school from learning environments that vary widely in resources, language exposure, instructional quality, and family support.

This is not a family deficit issue.

Age Group	State-Funded Preschool Enrollment, 2024–2025
3-year-olds	9%
4-year-olds	37%

It is an access and infrastructure issue.

Families want their children to succeed. But many families do not have consistent access to high-quality early learning programs, bilingual literacy tools, digital resources, transportation, flexible schedules, or guidance on how early literacy develops.

Families want their children to succeed.



Leadership Takeaway

If a district’s readiness strategy depends only on formal preschool enrollment, many children will remain unreached before kindergarten.

5. Family Literacy Is Powerful, But Not Equally Supported

Families are children’s first educators. Early literacy begins through everyday routines: talking, singing, reading, storytelling, naming objects, asking questions, playing with sounds, and building vocabulary.

National data show that families are actively engaging in literacy-supportive behaviors. NCES reported that in 2019, among 3- to 5-year-olds not yet in kindergarten:

- **85% were read to** by a family member three or more times in the prior week.
- **87% were told a story** by a family member at least once.
- **96% were taught letters, words, or numbers** by a family member at least once.
- **37% visited a library** with a family member in the previous month. [6]

For district leaders, the conclusion is clear: Family engagement cannot be limited to newsletters, occasional events, or expectations that parents already know what to do.

Those numbers show that families are already part of the literacy solution. However, access to literacy experiences is not evenly distributed. NCES reported differences in home literacy activities by race and ethnicity, including differences in how often children were read to and whether children visited a library. [6]

These differences are not evidence that some families value literacy less.

They are evidence that families experience different levels of access, time, language support, work flexibility, transportation, book availability, technology, and community infrastructure.

For district leaders, the conclusion is clear:

Family engagement cannot be limited to newsletters, occasional events, or expectations that parents already know what to do.

Families need practical, bilingual, accessible tools that make early literacy easy to build into daily life.

Home Literacy Activity	Percentage of 3- to 5-Year-Olds Not Yet in Kindergarten, 2019
Read to by a family member 3+ times in prior week	85%
Told a story by a family member at least once	87%
Taught letters, words, or numbers at least once	96%
Visited a library with a family member in prior month	37%



Leadership Takeaway

Families are already part of the literacy solution. The system challenge is making early literacy support consistent, bilingual, measurable, and easy to access.

6. The Crisis Becomes Visible in Reading Outcomes

The readiness crisis becomes visible in elementary reading data.

On the 2024 NAEP reading assessment, the average national Grade 4 reading score was 2 points lower than in 2022 and 5 points lower than in 2019. Only 31% of fourth-grade students performed at or above NAEP Proficient. [3]

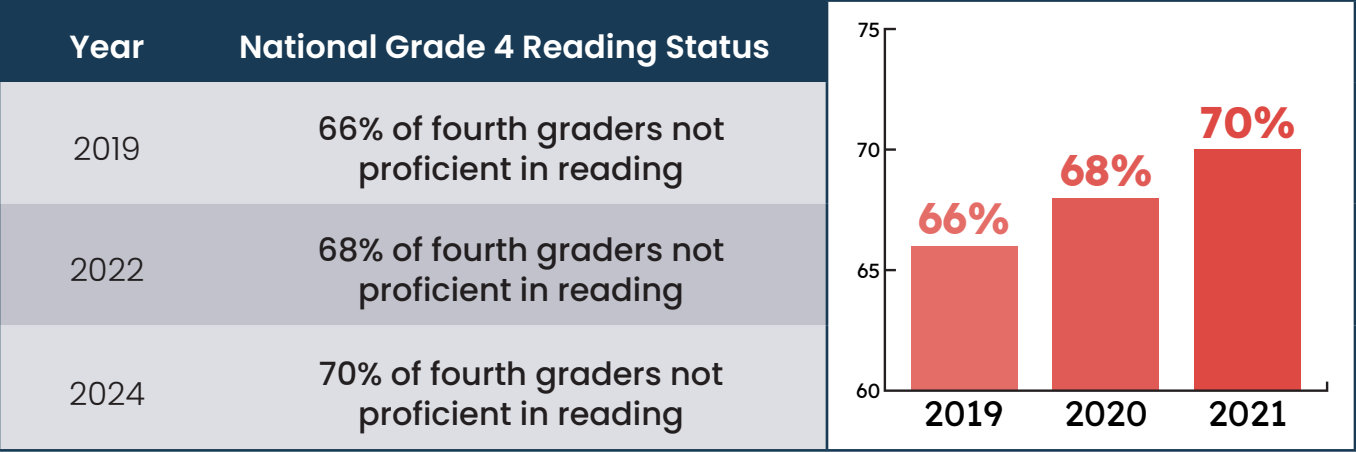
The Annie E. Casey Foundation reported the same concern in broader terms: 70% of fourth graders were not proficient in reading in 2024, up from 66% in 2019. [7]

This trend matters because fourth grade is a transition point. In the early grades, students are learning to read. By fourth grade, they are increasingly expected to read to learn.

Students must comprehend informational text, build vocabulary across content areas, write in response to reading, apply evidence, interpret academic language, and learn through text in science, social studies, math, and the arts.

When foundational readiness and early literacy are weak, the consequences compound:

- Intervention needs increase.
- Teachers must spend more time reteaching foundational skills.
- Students struggle with content-area learning.
- Middle school literacy demands become harder to meet.
- Districts spend more on tutoring, remediation, and supplemental supports.
- Leaders face pressure from boards, states, and communities to show improvement.



Leadership Takeaway

Reading challenges in Grade 4 are often the downstream signal of readiness gaps that began years earlier.

7. The Readiness Crisis Is Also an Infrastructure Crisis

Most communities have many people working hard on behalf of young children:

- Parents and caregivers
- Childcare providers
- Preschool teachers
- Elementary teachers
- Pediatricians
- Libraries
- Community organizations
- Faith-based organizations
- Nonprofits
- Local government agencies
- Interventionists
- Tutors
- District leaders
- Business and workforce partners



But effort is not the same as infrastructure.

In many communities, these partners are not connected through one readiness strategy, one data system, one common language, or one measurable pathway from birth through Grade 8.

That creates fragmentation.

A family may receive one message from a pediatrician, another from a preschool provider, another from a library, another from an elementary school, and another from a district family engagement office. A district may use one tool for family engagement, another for early learning, another for K–3 reading, another for intervention, and another for reporting.

This produces what many leaders experience as initiative fatigue, app fatigue, and data fragmentation.

The result is that leaders are accountable for kindergarten readiness and third-grade reading, but they often lack the infrastructure to connect early learning inputs to later academic outcomes.

The issue is not simply that there are too many programs.

The issue is that the programs are not connected into a unified architecture.

The result is that leaders are accountable for kindergarten readiness and third-grade reading, but they often lack the infrastructure to connect early learning inputs to later academic outcomes.



Fragmented Model	Connected Readiness System
Separate apps and programs	One coherent Birth–8 pathway
Family engagement disconnected from instruction	Families equipped as first educators
Preschool and K–3 operate separately	Early learning aligned to K–3 literacy
Community partners work in parallel	Partners share a measurable readiness goal
Data lives in separate systems	Leaders can monitor usage, growth, and impact
Remediation begins after gaps appear	Prevention begins before school entry
Third-grade reading treated as a late elementary issue	Third-grade reading planned backward to birth

8. The Cost of Waiting Is Systemic

The readiness crisis has academic consequences, but it also has operational consequences.

When children enter school with uneven readiness, districts must respond. That response often requires:

- More intervention time
 - More tutoring
 - More diagnostic assessment
 - More specialized staffing
 - More teacher planning support
- More family outreach
 - More summer learning
 - More supplemental materials
 - More progress monitoring
 - More pressure on K–3 teachers



Leadership Takeaway

The readiness crisis cannot be solved by isolated programs. It requires connected infrastructure.

This does not mean remediation is wrong. Remediation is necessary for students who need it.

But when remediation becomes the system’s dominant strategy, leaders are paying downstream for gaps that may have been reduced upstream.

For K–12 systems, the implication is direct:

A readiness strategy is not only an instructional strategy.

It is a cost-prevention strategy.

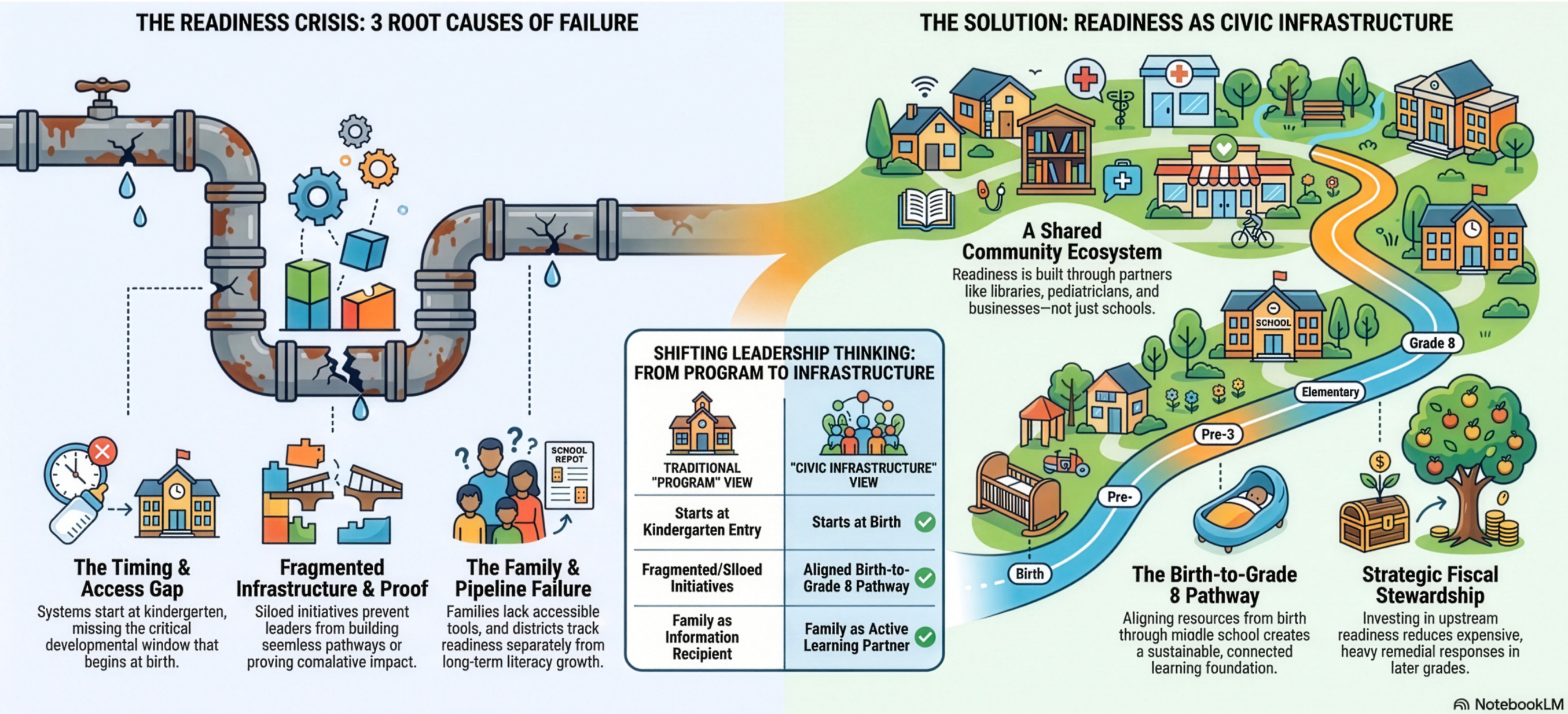
The more a district can strengthen early language, family engagement, and foundational literacy before children require intensive intervention, the more it can reduce pressure on the later system.

For K–12 systems, the implication is direct:
A readiness strategy is not only an instructional strategy.
It is a cost-prevention strategy.



9. The Readiness Crisis Has Three Root Causes and Why This Matters to Superintendents and Leaders

From Pipeline Failure to Civic Infrastructure: A New Frame for Literacy Readiness





System Goal

One community. One readiness strategy. One connected Birth–8 pathway.

10. What K–12 Leaders Should Do Now

☐ 1. Audit where readiness work currently begins

Ask: Does our district’s readiness strategy begin at birth, age 3, PreK, kindergarten, or after students are already struggling?

☐ 2. Identify unreached children and families

Ask: Which children live in our district boundaries but are not yet connected to our early learning or family engagement systems?

☐ 3. Build Tier 0 into MTSS

Ask: What would it look like to define Birth–Age 3 family literacy support as the bedrock of our MTSS?

☐ 4. Connect early learning and K–3 literacy

Ask: Are our early learning goals, kindergarten readiness expectations, K–3 literacy instruction, and intervention models aligned?

☐ 5. Equip families with practical tools

Ask: Are families receiving bilingual, accessible, engaging tools they can use every day, or are we only sending information?

☐ 6. Bring community partners into one strategy

Ask: Are libraries, early learning centers, local nonprofits, and civic partners working from the same readiness goal?

☐ 7. Demand measurable proof

Ask: Can we show usage, growth, family participation, and progress over time?

☐ 8. Connect readiness data to third-grade reading

Ask: Can we follow the pathway from readiness indicators to K–3 growth, intervention needs, and Grade 3 reading outcomes?

☐ 9. Extend readiness through Grade 8

Ask: How does our literacy strategy continue from foundational reading into comprehension, writing, financial literacy, decision-making, and real-world application?

11. Recommended Campaign Language for Your School Board and Communities

The readiness crisis is not just that too many children enter kindergarten underprepared. It is that districts are being asked to improve third-grade reading outcomes after many of the foundational conditions for reading success have already been shaped.

The best available national data show a readiness gap before school entry and a reading proficiency gap by upper elementary school. Longitudinal state research confirms the connection: students who enter kindergarten ready in literacy are significantly more likely to meet third-grade ELA standards.

Readiness is not a soft early childhood measure.

It is an early predictor of third-grade reading success.

Districts cannot remediate their way out of a readiness crisis. They need a connected Birth–8 infrastructure that starts earlier, supports families, aligns community partners, strengthens K–3 literacy, and proves the impact over time.

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12. Conclusion: Districts Cannot Remediate Their Way Out of a Readiness Crisis

The readiness crisis is not caused by one missing program, one weak curriculum, one family engagement gap, or one assessment issue.

It is caused by a system architecture that begins too late, reaches too few children before school entry, places too much burden on kindergarten and K–3 intervention, and lacks the connected data needed to prove long-term impact.

The readiness-to-reading connection makes the urgency even clearer.

Children who enter kindergarten with stronger readiness foundations are more likely to meet later reading standards. Children who enter without those foundations are more likely to require additional support during the K–3 years.

K–12 leaders need a new architecture.

That architecture must:

- Start at birth
- Equip families as first educators
- Treat Birth–5 as the foundation of MTSS
- Connect early learning to K–3 literacy
- Measure readiness as part of the third-grade reading strategy
- Extend literacy through Grade 8
- Unite community partners
- Provide measurable proof of impact

The future of literacy will not be built by remediation alone.

It will be built upstream.



Start Early. Connect Everything. Prove the Impact.

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