

WHITEPAPER

FROM READINESS TO THIRD-GRADE READING PROFICIENCY

What Current Data and Trend Analysis Show for K–12 Leaders

*Brief Paper for District and
Community Education Leaders*





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kindergarten readiness and third-grade reading proficiency are often treated as separate priorities. In practice, they are two points on the same developmental continuum.

Children do not become readers in third grade. They build the language, vocabulary, oral comprehension, phonological awareness, attention, confidence, and learning behaviors that support reading long before they enter kindergarten.

Current national data show four important realities:

1. **Readiness is uneven before school entry.** Nationally, 64.6% of children ages 3–5 were considered “Healthy and Ready to Learn” in 2022–2023, meaning approximately 35.4% were not fully on track across key readiness domains. [1]
2. **Formal early learning access remains incomplete.** In 2024–2025, state-funded preschools served 9% of 3-year-olds and 37% of 4-year-olds nationally. This means many children still enter kindergarten without consistent access to formal early learning. [2]
3. **Reading proficiency remains a national concern.** On the 2024 NAEP reading assessment, only 31% of fourth-grade students performed at or above NAEP Proficient. National Grade 4 reading scores were 2 points lower than 2022 and 5 points lower than 2019. [3]

- 4. Readiness and later reading achievement are positively connected.** While there is not one nationally valid correlation coefficient that compares kindergarten readiness to third-grade reading proficiency across all 50 states, longitudinal state research confirms the relationship. 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. [6]

Because there is no single national third-grade reading assessment across all states, Grade 4 NAEP reading is commonly used as the closest national benchmark after the third-grade reading milestone. The trend is clear: too many children are entering the K–3 pathway without strong readiness foundations, and too many are reaching upper elementary school without strong reading proficiency.

The implication for K–12 leaders is direct: districts cannot treat kindergarten readiness as an early childhood issue and third-grade reading as an elementary issue. They must be planned together as one connected Birth–8th grade literacy strategy.

1. Why Readiness and Third-Grade Reading Must Be Compared Together

Third-grade reading proficiency is widely recognized as a critical milestone because it marks the transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” By fourth grade, students are expected to use reading to access science, social studies, math problems, writing tasks, and increasingly complex informational text.

But the skills that support third-grade reading begin years earlier.



Kindergarten readiness includes more than knowing letters or numbers. It includes:

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

When children enter kindergarten without these foundations, the K–3 system must work harder to close gaps while also teaching grade-level content.

When children enter kindergarten without these foundations, the K–3 system must work harder to close gaps while also teaching grade-level content. This creates a compression problem: schools are expected to build foundational skills, remediate early gaps, and accelerate students toward third-grade proficiency at the same time.

2. Current State of Readiness

National readiness data are not as standardized as reading data. States use different kindergarten entry assessments, and not all states require the same measures. In 2023–2024, 27 states required districts to formally assess kindergarten readiness, while other states collected readiness information through different methods such as literacy screeners, PreK assessments, or locally selected tools. [4]

This creates a measurement challenge: readiness is clearly important, but it is not measured nationally in the same consistent way as NAEP reading.

Still, available national indicators show that readiness is uneven.

The Title V National Outcome Measure for School Readiness reported that in 2022–2023, 64.6% of 3- to 5-year-old U.S. children were considered Healthy and Ready to Learn. These children were “on track” in four to five developmental domains without needing support in any domain. [1]

That means approximately 35.4% of young children were not fully on track by this measure.

The measure includes five domains:

- Early Learning Skills
- Social-Emotional Development
- Self-Regulation
- Motor Development
- Health

This matters because readiness is not a narrow academic measure. It reflects the broader set of developmental capacities children need to succeed in school.

Indicator	Current National Data
3- to 5-year-olds considered Healthy and Ready to Learn, 2022–2023	64.6%
3- to 5-year-olds not fully on track by this measure	35.4%
States requiring kindergarten readiness assessments, 2023–2024	27 states
State-funded preschool enrollment for 3-year-olds, 2024–2025	9%
State-funded preschool enrollment for 4-year-olds, 2024–2025	37%



Leadership Takeaway

Readiness is not universal, and many children are outside consistent formal early learning systems before kindergarten.

3. Current State of Early Learning Access

Formal early learning can support readiness, but access remains incomplete across the country.

NIEER reported that in 2024–2025, state-funded preschool enrolled 9% of 3-year-olds and 37% of 4-year-olds nationally. [2]

This means many young children are not reached by state-funded preschool before kindergarten. While some children may participate in Head Start, childcare, private preschool, family childcare, or other community-based programs, access varies widely by state, income, geography, family schedule, program availability, transportation, and language needs.

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

For district leaders, this creates a strategic challenge. If a district’s readiness strategy only reaches children who are already enrolled in district PreK or formal early learning programs, many children in the community will remain outside the readiness pipeline before kindergarten.



Leadership Takeaway

A readiness strategy that depends only on formal preschool enrollment will not reach enough children before kindergarten.

4. Current State of Third-Grade Reading Proficiency

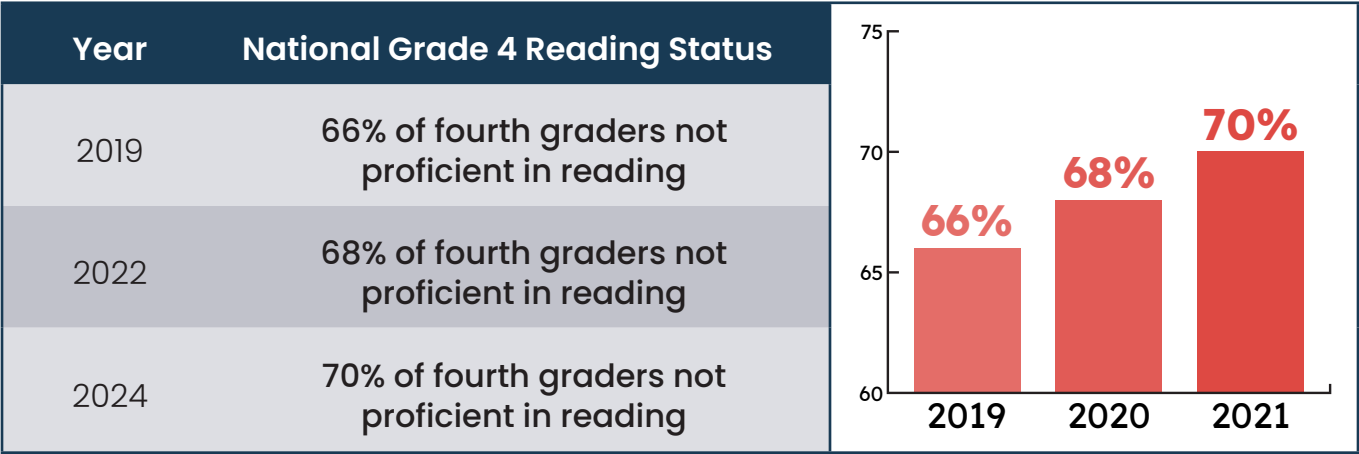
There is no single national third-grade reading test that allows direct state-by-state comparison. Therefore, this paper uses Grade 4 NAEP reading as the closest national indicator after the third-grade proficiency milestone.

The 2024 NAEP reading results show that:

- 31% of fourth-grade students performed at or above NAEP Proficient.
- The national average Grade 4 reading score was 2 points lower than 2022.
- The national average Grade 4 reading score was 5 points lower than 2019. [3]

The Annie E. Casey Foundation reported the same concern in a different form: 70% of fourth graders were not proficient in reading in 2024, up from 66% in 2019. [5]

NAEP Proficient should not be interpreted as the same thing as state-defined grade-level proficiency. NAEP uses a rigorous national benchmark. However, the trend still matters: national reading performance has weakened since 2019, and a large share of students are not demonstrating strong reading comprehension by upper elementary school.



5. What We Know About the Correlation Between Kindergarten Readiness and Third-Grade Reading

A logical question for district leaders 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 short answer is: yes, 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 the two measures are not collected in a fully comparable way nationwide.

Kindergarten readiness is not measured the same way in every state. Some states use formal kindergarten entry assessments, while others use literacy screeners, developmental indicators, PreK assessments, or locally selected tools. The National Survey of Children's Health provides the only standardized national and state-level measure of readiness for young children, but it is based on parent and caregiver responses for children ages 3–5, not a universal kindergarten-entry assessment. In 2022–2023, the NSCH reported that 64.6% of U.S. children ages 3–5 were considered Healthy and Ready to Learn, with state rates ranging from 53.4% to 75.3%. [1]

Third-grade reading proficiency also varies by state because each state uses its own Grade 3 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 state.

The closest nationally comparable reading benchmark is NAEP Grade 4 reading. NAEP is administered consistently across states, but it measures fourth grade, not third grade. In 2024, 31% of fourth-grade students nationally performed at or above NAEP Proficient in reading. NAEP also cautions that NAEP Proficient is not the same as grade-level proficiency on state assessments. [3]

What Longitudinal Evidence Shows

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

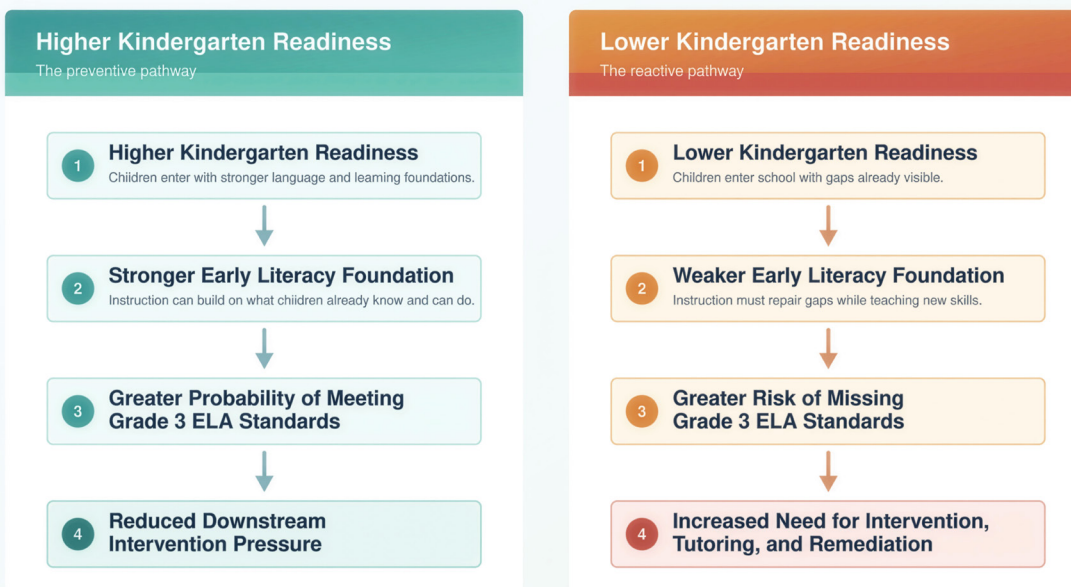
A Washington State study matched 43,458 students from the 2015–2016 kindergarten cohort to their 2018–2019 third-grade assessment results. The study found that kindergarten readiness predicted whether students met third-grade standards, even after controlling for student characteristics. Students who 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. [6]

The study also found that readiness in other domains mattered. 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. [6]

Evidence Source	What It Shows	Leadership Meaning
<i>National Survey of Children's Health</i>	64.6% of children ages 3–5 were Healthy and Ready to Learn in 2022–2023	<i>Readiness is uneven before school entry</i>
<i>NAEP Grade 4 Reading</i>	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>
<i>Washington State longitudinal study</i>	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>

Kindergarten Readiness Predicts the Reading Pathway

Readiness is not a one-time milestone. It shapes the strength, risk, and cost of the K-3 literacy journey.



Leadership Takeaway

Kindergarten readiness changes the cost curve of third-grade reading success.

Leadership Interpretation

For district leaders, the most important finding is not a single national correlation number. The most important finding is the direction and consistency of the relationship.

The evidence shows that children who enter kindergarten with stronger readiness skills are more likely to meet later reading standards. Children who enter kindergarten without strong readiness foundations are more likely to require additional support during the K–3 years.

This means kindergarten readiness should be treated as an early warning indicator for third-grade reading proficiency.

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.

6. Trend Analysis: What the Data Suggest

The comparison between readiness indicators and third/fourth-grade reading outcomes shows a clear pattern.

Trend 1: Readiness gaps appear before districts typically intervene

National readiness data show that roughly one-third of 3- to 5-year-olds are not fully on track across readiness domains. At the same time, formal preschool access remains incomplete, particularly for 3-year-olds.

This suggests that many children enter kindergarten with uneven early learning experiences. Districts then inherit readiness gaps that may have been forming for years.

Trend 2: Reading proficiency challenges persist after K–3 instruction

Even after several years of formal schooling, only 31% of fourth-grade students performed at or above NAEP Proficient in 2024. While NAEP Proficient is not the same as state grade-level proficiency, the direction of the trend is still concerning.

Reading scores declined from 2019 to 2024, meaning the system has not fully recovered from pandemic-era disruption and may also be facing deeper, longer-term challenges.

Trend 3: The gap between readiness and proficiency creates downstream pressure

When children enter kindergarten without strong readiness foundations, schools must use K–3 time to both build missing foundational skills and teach grade-level reading expectations. This places pressure on:

- Kindergarten teachers
- K–3 classroom instruction
- Intervention teams
- Special education referral systems
- Tutoring programs
- Summer learning programs
- Family engagement teams
- District literacy budgets

Trend 4: Access to early learning is not broad enough to solve the problem alone

State-funded preschool has expanded, but it still reaches a minority of 3-year-olds and only a little more than one-third of 4-year-olds nationally. This means a readiness strategy that depends only on formal preschool enrollment will miss many children.

Districts need ways to support families and children before formal school entry, including those not enrolled in district PreK, Head Start, childcare, or community preschool programs.

Trend 5: Readiness predicts reading, but the system does not measure the pipeline consistently

The evidence shows that readiness and later reading success are connected. However, most districts and states do not yet have a clean, longitudinal readiness-to-reading data pipeline that follows children from Birth–5 into K–3 outcomes.

This is a major leadership problem. If readiness investments are not connected to later literacy data, districts struggle to prove which upstream strategies are reducing downstream reading gaps.

Trend 6: Readiness must become part of the district literacy strategy

The data suggest that third-grade reading proficiency cannot be solved by third-grade intervention alone. It requires a stronger pipeline from birth through Grade 3, with particular attention to:

- ✓ Birth–Age 3 language development
- ✓ Family literacy routines
- ✓ PreK access and quality
- ✓ Kindergarten transition
- ✓ K–3 foundational literacy
- ✓ Progress monitoring
- ✓ Early intervention
- ✓ Community partnerships

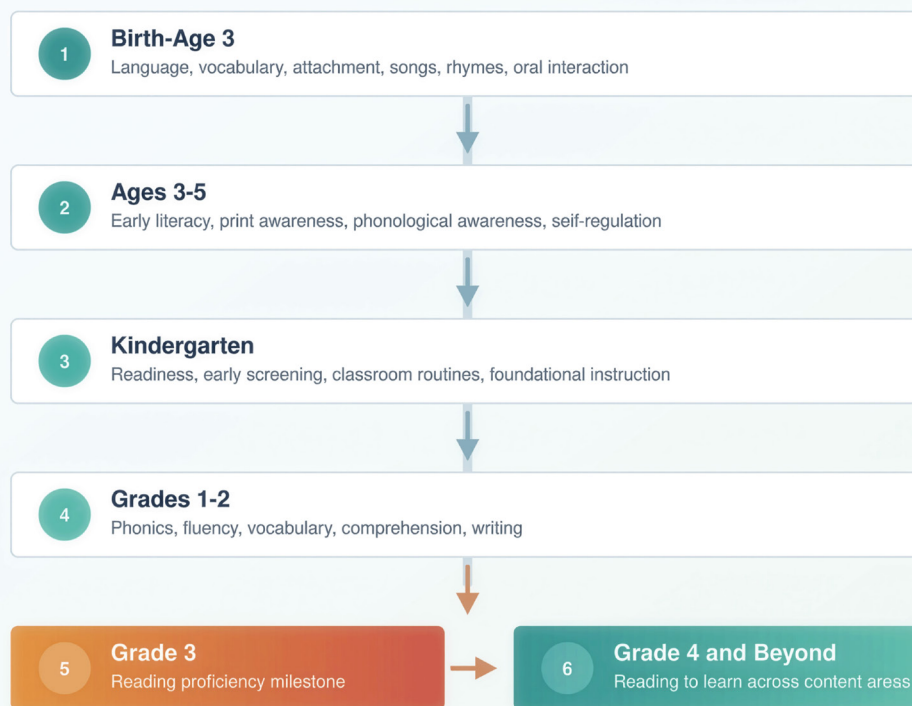




7. The Readiness-to-Reading Pipeline

The Reading Pathway Begins at Birth

A connected Birth-to-Grade 4 pathway shows how early language becomes later reading success.



Leadership Takeaway

Third-grade reading is the outcome of a readiness pipeline, not a stand-alone instructional event.

8. What the Data Mean for District Leaders

The current data point to a strategic conclusion: districts need to move from a remediation-centered model to a prevention-centered readiness model.

This does not mean remediation goes away. Students who need support must receive it. But the long-term strategy must reduce the number of students who need intensive downstream support by strengthening readiness earlier.

District leaders should ask:

- Where does our literacy strategy actually begin: birth, PreK, kindergarten, or after students struggle?
- What percentage of children in our community are reached before kindergarten?
- Are families equipped with simple, bilingual tools to build language and literacy at home?
- Are early learning, kindergarten readiness, K–3 literacy, intervention, and family engagement connected?
- Can we track whether upstream readiness investments are improving downstream reading outcomes?
- How are community partners contributing to one shared readiness strategy?
- Are we measuring readiness as part of our third-grade reading strategy?
- Do we have a longitudinal data model that connects readiness indicators to Grade 3 reading outcomes?



9. Strategic Implications

1. Treat Birth–5 as the foundation of third-grade reading

Third-grade reading proficiency should be planned backward to birth. Districts that want stronger Grade 3 outcomes need stronger Birth–5 readiness systems.

2. Build Tier 0 into MTSS

Traditional MTSS begins once children are enrolled in school. A prevention-centered model adds Tier 0: the family and community readiness layer that begins before formal school entry.

3. Expand family engagement from communication to capacity-building

Families need practical tools, not just information. A strong readiness strategy helps caregivers build vocabulary, oral language, and literacy routines every day.

4. Connect early learning and elementary literacy

PreK, kindergarten, and K–3 literacy should not operate as separate initiatives. They should function as one coherent pathway.

5. Use data to connect readiness and reading outcomes

District leaders need longitudinal visibility. Readiness data should be connected to kindergarten entry, K–3 growth, intervention needs, and third-grade reading outcomes.

6. Avoid overclaiming a national correlation number

Because kindergarten readiness and third-grade reading proficiency are measured differently across states, leaders should avoid claiming one precise national correlation coefficient. The stronger and more defensible claim is that national data show readiness gaps before school entry, national reading data show proficiency gaps by upper elementary school, and longitudinal studies confirm that kindergarten readiness predicts later reading success.

10. Recommended Campaign Language for Your Board and Community

Across the country, the relationship between kindergarten readiness and later reading proficiency is strongly positive, but a precise national correlation coefficient cannot be stated responsibly because states do not use one common kindergarten readiness measure or one common third-grade reading proficiency standard.

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.

The leadership conclusion is clear:

Readiness is not a soft early childhood measure. It is an early predictor of third-grade reading success.



11. Conclusion

The comparison between readiness and reading proficiency reveals a preventable system gap.

Current data show that many children are not fully on track before kindergarten, many do not have access to formal early learning, and too many students reach upper elementary school without strong reading proficiency.

The trend analysis is clear:

- » Readiness gaps begin before kindergarten.
- » Reading proficiency challenges persist through Grade 3 and Grade 4.
- » Formal preschool access alone does not reach enough children.
- » K–3 intervention alone cannot carry the full weight of the crisis.
- » Readiness and later reading achievement are positively connected.
- » Districts need better longitudinal data connecting readiness to Grade 3 reading outcomes.
- » Districts need a connected Birth–8 readiness and literacy infrastructure.

The path forward is not more reactive remediation by itself.

The path forward is upstream readiness.

Start earlier. Connect families and schools. Strengthen K–3 literacy. Prove the impact.



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[6] Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. *Kindergarten Readiness and 3rd Grade Outcomes. 2023.*



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