

Policy recommendations for addressing the middle school reading crisis

Miah Daughtery and Chad Aldeman



Introduction

The most recent results from the [National Assessment on Education Progress \(NAEP\)](#) reading assessment, known as the “Nation’s Report Card,” highlighted a troubling trend in US literacy: [eighth-grade reading scores dropped by five points since 2019](#), with only 30% of students performing at or above the NAEP proficient level. [NWEA’s research](#) underscores this troubling trend, reiterating that middle school students continue to lag their prepandemic peers and may need up to a full academic year of additional instruction to regain ground. However, the pandemic did not create this crisis. It added fuel to an already existing fire. For at least the last decade, [middle and high school teachers expressed](#) their concerns as students struggled to read full books, and more recently, [college faculty shared](#) how incoming college students are not prepared for the literacy demands of higher education. This sentiment is echoed in NAEP reading scores for eighth-graders, which have shown little growth since 2005.

The middle school experience is unique. Many students will have separate teachers for each content area, daily, and many will transition to English language arts instead of reading. Students quickly find themselves without broadly structured reading instruction. Yet, they are expected to read and write across the school day on increasingly complex texts and on topics where they may have limited academic vocabulary and background knowledge. Complexity compounds for students in need of intervention and multilingual learners, who may need robust reading support in addition to the deluge of texts they are assigned across ELA, science, and social studies.

While much of the national conversation around reading has rightly focused on the early years of school, where foundational literacy skills are formed, many students leave fifth grade still struggling to read. Policy makers, along with district leaders, must prioritize a systems-level approach to literacy that supports the needs of our youngest students while not missing the unique literacy needs of our middle and high school students.

Key components

This policy brief outlines four components that state policy and district leaders can utilize to better support the literacy needs of students across the K-12 spectrum, particularly at the middle school level.

Component one: high-quality, grade-appropriate assessments that provide specific data on the literacy needs of middle schoolers

Unlike in grades K-3, where reading assessments measure foundational reading skills like phonemic awareness and phonics, and comprehension, by middle school, most assessments prioritize comprehension, meaning that for most students, a reading difficulty will show up as a comprehension issue. But low comprehension can result from several factors, including poor decoding skills, weak reading fluency, or a limited vocabulary.

In addition, students who demonstrate reading difficulty need a diagnostic assessment to further understand their struggle and what intervention will serve them best. However, in middle school, most assessments only identify when students underperform in reading but do not provide the why and what of their specific challenge.

Recommendation: Policy makers and district leaders must consider the type of assessments and data utilized to understand, diagnose, and support middle school students, as part of a comprehensive approach in K-12 literacy.

Component two: state and district policy makers should support flexible scheduling and policies that promote literacy development throughout the entire school day and help districts more effectively use instructional time.

Students attend school for a fixed number of days—typically most states are set around 180 days spread over nine months. Given the additional instructional time now needed to address the lingering impacts from the pandemic, with the added factor of a rise in chronic absenteeism, time both in school and in each classroom is a critical lever for school reform.

First, we encourage policy makers to support and invest in a time analysis at the local level. For example, [a 2021 study in the Providence Public School District](#) found that external classroom interruptions (like school announcements, class visitors, phone calls) totaled up to 2,000 in a year, resulting in close to 20 days of lost instructional time. While one study cannot be generalized to every school district, it is illustrative of the kind of analysis that a district can conduct to better understand how they use time.

Second, explore repurposing time for literacy instruction and support in middle school while understanding the unique reading needs of adolescents. This includes [innovation around planning and collaborative time, flexible instructional blocks for differentiations, and opportunities for small group instruction](#). Getting minutes and days focused on literacy instruction is a start, while leveraging that time to promote reading and writing in meaningful ways is even more important.

Recommendation: State policy makers should encourage and support districts to use innovative approaches to build in additional instruction and interventions that support middle school literacy.

Component three: Understand and support the unique literacy needs of middle schoolers across subjects and disciplines.

Content becomes increasingly discipline-specific beginning in sixth grade. While middle school literacy is most associated with language arts, reading and writing are integrated practices that underpin every discipline requiring literacy skills that go beyond English class. Just like reading skills in the early grades focus on foundations that an emerging reader needs to go from “learning to read” to “reading to learn,” at the middle school level, reading skills must address the widening expectations and complexities of the variety of text that students will encounter. In practical terms, this means middle schoolers need ongoing instruction in multisyllabic decoding, vocabulary acquisition, reading fluency, and writing, as well as how to navigate primary and secondary source documents, maps, graphs, and political cartoons in social studies, reports and research in science, and equations and word problems in mathematics. With each discipline comes an accompanying text that is rich in the precise language of that subject, like “theme,” “mitosis,” and “amendment.” To do this well, teachers will need ongoing literacy development to effectively support instruction in their specific discipline while understanding how that instruction supports other disciplines.

Recommendation: State policy makers, along with district leaders, must approach literacy development for middle schoolers from a systems perspective and invest in teacher professional learning in all disciplines, including at the upper grades, in their state literacy plans. Some states have already begun this effort and can serve as a model, including [Illinois’s Comprehensive Literacy Plan](#), Maryland’s Adolescent Literacy policy, and [Michigan’s Literacy Essentials](#), which includes a suite of resources for grades 6–12.

Component four: relationships with external partners, like community organizations and nonprofits, who share similar goals in improving literacy outcomes, can both support and reinforce literacy development, stretching beyond the school’s hours and resources.

Addressing the middle school literacy crisis requires an all-hands-on-deck approach that includes partnership and resources beyond what a school can provide. Third spaces—such as community programs and after-school activities—can strengthen connections between school and home and reinforce knowledge building that boosts student confidence and engagement. [Research has shown](#) that leveraging third spaces for academic development lowers high school dropout rates, increases reading scores, and improves academic grade point averages for students who participate in third-space activities.

Recommendation: Policy makers and district leaders must promote these partnerships that support literacy outcomes by incentivizing student participation and encouraging schools to host third-space programs.

Additional considerations

No policy is created in a vacuum. This section outlines contextual factors affecting middle school students and educators—factors that must be considered alongside any policy changes.

- **All means all:** While we focus on middle school students, the latest NAEP scores as well as additional evidence on the postpandemic struggles of students, highlight that reading declines are seen across all student groups. Having a systemic approach to addressing the challenges is essential.
- **Instructional change:** To improve middle school literacy means we must evolve our teaching practices to support their unique needs. Our educators need high-quality professional learning focused on implementing evidence-based instructional materials, understanding the science of reading for adolescents, and teaching reading and writing in ALL content areas.
- **Addressing student absenteeism:** If a student is not in school, no amount of policy and instructional change will address their needs. Chronic absenteeism remains a significant barrier to COVID academic recovery and to literacy improvement.
- **Understanding motivation and engagement:** Struggling readers often lack the willingness to read (motivation) while not actively participating in reading (engagement). Any programs, interventions, and instruction must consider this factor and look for ways to boost a student’s ownership, confidence, and involvement in their reading journey. This includes establishing reading goals, offering choice, providing interesting text, and encouraging collaborative reading.

Conclusion

Middle school literacy is a complex, ongoing challenge, and it demands intentional, well-funded, and focused policy leadership. Learning to read is not done when a student exits fifth grade; policy support cannot stop there either. Many states have recognized the role of policy in supporting elementary reading, with 40 states and the District of Columbia passing laws recently aligned with science of reading evidence-based practices for grades K-5. To build on this progress, states must now extend resources, systems reforms, and sustained funding to support the more complex literacy needs of adolescents to prepare them for the discipline-specific text they will encounter in middle school and beyond.

Authors

Miah Daughtery, EdD

Miah Daughtery is the VP, content advocacy-literacy at NWEA, where she spends her days figuring out how to get kids more excited about reading and writing. Prior to joining NWEA, she was a classroom reading and English teacher for almost 10 years, a district literacy specialist, the state literacy coordinator for the Tennessee Department of Education, the director of literacy for Achieve, and the executive director of professional learning for Odell Education. She earned her BA in English at the University of Michigan, her EdM in reading at Wayne State University, and her EdD in public policy and educational administration from Vanderbilt's Peabody School of Education in 2016.



Chad Aldeman

Chad Aldeman is the founder of Read Not Guess and an independent contractor working with leading organizations, such as HMH, pursuing dramatic improvements in K-12 education. He researches and writes about student academic outcomes, school finance, the teacher labor market, and assessment and accountability policy. He has worked at the Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University, Bellwether Education, and the U.S. Department of Education. Chad has written extensively on education policy, including on state higher education accountability systems, the potential of improving high school accountability by incorporating outcomes data, the school choice process in New York City and Boston, teacher pensions, teacher and principal evaluations, teacher salary schedules, and teacher preparation. His work has been featured in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *InsideHigherEd*, *Newsday*, and the *Des Moines Register*. Chad holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Iowa and a master's of public policy degree from the College of William and Mary.





© 2025 HMH Education Company. NWEA® is a registered trademark, of HMH Education Company in the US and in other countries. The names of other companies and their products mentioned are the trademarks of their respective owners.

JUL25 | NWEA_WF2313700