



BRIEF

Struggling adolescent readers left behind: Evidence of post-COVID-19 declines and pathways forward

Megan Kuhfeld, Naomi Duran, Karyn Lewis, Carrie Heath Phillips, and Samantha Musacchia

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KEY FINDINGS

- In contrast to signs of progress toward academic recovery in math and in elementary grades in reading, middle school reading test scores have stagnated for the average student and continued to drop among struggling readers.
- Across multiple assessments, reading test scores for the lowest-achieving middle school students continued dropping after 2022.

Introduction

After years of discouraging headlines about a nationwide “[learning recession](#)” and test score declines following the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been some [recent positive trends](#) suggesting that schools may be turning the tide of recovery. Across [multiple post-COVID assessments](#), we have seen incremental progress in math and scores stabilizing or even showing small improvements in reading. For example, the [Education Scorecard](#) showed higher than expected growth in both math and reading from 2024 to 2025. [NWEA data](#) indicate that at least one in three public schools has fully recovered from COVID-19 learning declines by 2024. It is important to acknowledge and celebrate this hard-won progress.

Despite these encouraging signs of progress, there are [consistent](#) and [alarming signs](#) that middle school reading test scores have continued to decline following the pandemic. In this brief, we dig into the most recent data on adolescent literacy, focusing specifically on how struggling readers have fared compared to higher-achieving students. These persistent declines suggest that recent literacy reforms, which have largely focused on early grades, may not adequately support students whose reading difficulties extend into middle school. We therefore conclude by highlighting some promising state policies that build on successful early literacy reforms and extend supports into the middle school grades.

Continued declines for lowest-performing middle school readers following COVID-19

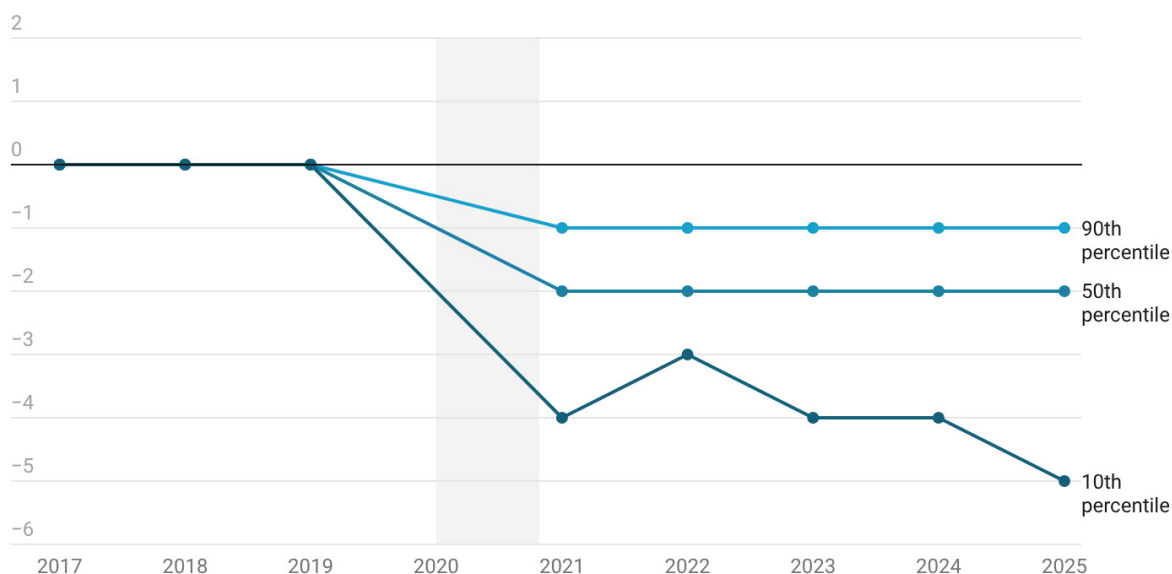
Figure 1 tracks changes in sixth-grade MAP Growth reading scores between 2017 and 2025 for students at the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentile¹ of the score distribution. To make changes over time easier to compare, each percentile group’s average score is shown relative to its own average in 2019, with values below zero indicating declines in reading achievement from pre-pandemic levels. Although students at the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentiles differed substantially in their reading achievement before the pandemic, each group begins at zero because the figure shows changes relative to its own pre-pandemic baseline.

Across the distribution, students’ reading scores fell between spring 2019 and spring 2021 following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with larger declines among lower-achieving students. These trajectories diverge after 2022. Reading scores for students at the middle and top of the distribution remain below pre-pandemic trends but largely stabilized. In contrast, reading scores for students at the 10th percentile have not stabilized. Despite some year-to-year fluctuation, their reading scores continued to trend downward

¹ The data used in this brief comes from the [MAP Growth National Dashboard](#), which is based on test scores from over 20 million K-8 students in 30,000 schools. Within each grade/subject/term, we estimated the RIT score corresponding to the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentile of the *observed* score distribution in that term (i.e., the scores below which 10%, 50%, and 90% of students performed). More methodological details are available in the technical appendix.

overall, leaving them even further below 2019 levels by 2025. As a result, the gap in reading skills between middle school students at the bottom and top of the distribution has continued to widen in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Figure 1 illustrates these patterns for sixth grade, similar trends are observed across the middle grades (see Technical Appendix).

Figure 1. Sixth-grade students at the 10th percentile in reading continued declining after the pandemic



Note. The RIT score corresponding to the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentiles of the observed score distribution (i.e., the scores below with 10%, 50%, and 90% of students performed) in sixth-grade reading were calculated in each year and reported relative to the 2019 estimate for each percentile level. Therefore, each line can be interpreted as the trend at a percentile level compared to spring 2019. Trends for seventh- and eighth-grade reading are available in the technical appendix.

Post-COVID-19 declines at the 10th percentile replicate across assessments

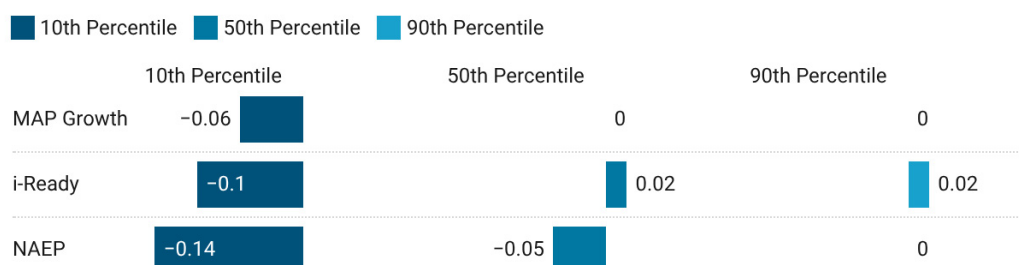
This continued decline in reading skills at the 10th percentile on the MAP Growth assessment is concerning. Importantly, this pattern is not unique to MAP Growth. Similar trends emerge across multiple national middle school reading assessments that allow for breakdowns by achievement level. Figure 2 shows a comparison of post-COVID 8th grade reading trends at the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentile across three assessments: (A) MAP Growth data from 2022 to 2025, (B) i-Ready data reported by Curriculum Associates from 2022 to 2025, and (C) National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data from 2022 to 2024. Because each assessment reports scores on a different scale, the results are expressed as changes in standard deviation (SD) units, allowing trends to be compared across measures.²

Across the assessments, students at the bottom of the distribution continued to decline in the years following COVID-19, while students at the middle and the top of the distribution have mostly stabilized. Although the magnitude of the declines differs across assessments, the overall pattern is remarkably consistent: the lowest-achieving middle school readers have not experienced the same stabilization

² To put the standard deviation estimates in perspective, the [average intervention](#) raises student achievement by about 0.05 standard deviations. Calculations are reported in the technical appendix.

observed among their higher-achieving peers. The consistency of the story for middle school students at the bottom of the distribution highlights the urgent need to expand literacy supports for struggling students beyond elementary grades.

Figure 2. Continued post-COVID-19 reading declines among the lowest-achieving middle school students are evident across multiple national assessments



Note. MAP Growth: eighth-grade score shifts from 2022 to 2025 reported in technical appendix; i-Ready: eighth-grade score shifts from 2022 to 2025 pulled from [State of Student Learning](#) report; NAEP: eighth-grade score shifts from 2022 to 2024 pulled from [NAEP Data Explorer](#). Estimates for other middle school grades for MAP Growth and i-Ready are provided in the technical appendix.

What these findings mean for state leaders

These results highlight a clear and urgent challenge: unlike students in the middle and upper portions of the achievement distribution, the lowest-performing middle school readers have not experienced post-pandemic stabilization. Instead, they continue to fall further behind, widening reading achievement gaps within middle school.

What do these findings mean for state leaders? The evidence presented here suggests that existing early-literacy reforms, though essential, are not sufficient to support students whose reading difficulties persist in upper elementary and middle school. Addressing these widening gaps will require state leaders to shift from isolated interventions toward coherent, system-level approaches that align curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional learning across the K-8 continuum.

The purpose of this brief is not only to document these concerning trends but also to highlight how states are responding. Below, we highlight several promising policy approaches emerging across states.

Sustain and deepen K-3 literacy as the foundation for long-term reading recovery.

The past decade of K-3 literacy reform has shown that meaningful improvements in early reading outcomes are possible when states commit to aligned, evidence-based strategies over time. Investments in high-quality instructional materials, teacher preparation, coherent implementation, and accountability have helped improve early-grade reading performance and narrow gaps before they widen. However, these gains are fragile and require sustained commitment. State leaders should view early literacy reform as a long-term endeavor—continuing to invest in K-3 systems even as attention expands to upper grades—recognizing that literacy improvement is a marathon, not a sprint.

State examples

Mississippi's [widely cited improvement](#) in fourth grade reading outcomes reflects years of consistent investment in early literacy, including aligned curriculum, professional learning, and assessment practices—demonstrating the impact of sustained, system-level reform rather than short-term initiatives. **Louisiana** [similarly prioritized early literacy](#) through statewide curriculum guidance, teacher support, and coherence across classrooms, reinforcing the importance of maintaining momentum and fidelity over time to achieve lasting results.

Extend early-reading initiatives into a comprehensive K–8 literacy system.

The lowest-achieving students in grades 4–8 have experienced disproportionately large and persistent reading declines, particularly in upper elementary and middle school, even as higher-performing peers have stabilized. These patterns suggest that early-literacy reforms, while necessary, are insufficient on their own. States should integrate strong K–3 literacy reforms with literacy policy aligned to the science of reading for grades 4–8, ensuring that all students experience core, Tier 1 literacy instruction that helps them comprehend the complex texts they encounter as they age. This requires updating standards, curricula, and instructional expectations to explicitly include advanced foundational skills—such as multisyllabic word decoding, [morphology](#), and syntax—across later grades.

State examples

Maryland's [draft preK–12 Comprehensive Literacy Policy](#) explicitly extends literacy expectations into grades 4–12, requiring instruction and assessment in advanced foundational skills alongside comprehension and vocabulary. Similarly, **Mississippi's** [newly enacted legislation](#) requires updates to state standards for literacy in K–8, access to high-quality Tier 1 core instruction, and a system of assessment and intervention. **Minnesota's** [READ Act](#) reflects a system-wide approach by embedding foundational literacy expectations beyond the early grades, signaling a shift toward a coherent K–8 (and beyond) literacy continuum.

Implement targeted literacy assessments and interventions in grades 4–8.

For adolescents struggling with reading comprehension, assessments must quickly and comprehensively target students' areas of reading difficulty in order to make the best use of limited instructional time. States should require use of diagnostic assessments for students performing below grade level in reading. Screening and intervention systems should also be designed to meet the particular needs of multilingual learners, with appropriate accommodations and guidance to ensure results are interpreted accurately. Interventions should tightly match the precise skill needs a student has, align to the developmental needs of adolescents, and ensure the dosage is sufficient to meaningfully improve student learning.

State examples

Minnesota requires [statewide screening of students](#) in grades 4–12 for advanced foundational literacy skills, ensuring that decoding and related gaps are identified well beyond third grade. **Indiana's** [recent legislation](#) directs the state to establish a system for identifying struggling readers in grades 4–8, reflecting growing recognition that literacy monitoring must continue into the middle grades.

Scale high-quality instructional materials aligned with literacy research and assessment.

High-quality instructional materials are a cost-effective and powerful lever for improving literacy outcomes, particularly for students who are furthest behind. States should continue to vet and promote the use of research-aligned ELA curricula in grades K–8 that reflect the science of reading and include embedded supports for differentiation and intervention. Alignment between curriculum, assessment, and instructional practice is critical: when students encounter coherent expectations and reinforced skills across classrooms and grades, recovery efforts are more likely to translate into sustained gains.

State examples

Indiana's list of recommended [HQIM includes core ELA programs for grades 6–8](#) to guide districts in selecting evidence-based materials. **Ohio** has [similarly elevated curriculum quality](#) as a central pillar of its literacy strategy, providing districts with vetted lists of instructional materials and intervention tools to ensure consistency and coherence across schools.

Invest in professional learning focused on upper-grade literacy instruction for teachers of all subjects.

The persistence of reading declines among older struggling readers highlights a capacity gap: many educators in grades 4–8 have not received the same depth of preparation in literacy development and remediation as early elementary teachers. States should prioritize ongoing, curriculum-based professional learning that equips upper-grade educators—including teachers in social studies, science, mathematics, and other subject areas—to teach advanced foundational skills, interpret assessment data, and deliver targeted support related to their subject-area content and within core instruction. Building educator expertise is essential for translating policy reforms and new materials into effective classroom practice.

State examples

Michigan [has invested heavily](#) in statewide processes to identify and support the adoption of high-quality literacy materials in preK–5, pairing curriculum guidance with professional learning to support teachers in applying research-based practices. This focus on educator capacity offers a model for states seeking to strengthen adolescent literacy instruction alongside curriculum and assessment reforms. **Oregon's** [Adolescent Literacy Framework](#) sets the vision and plan for how the state will strengthen literacy instruction across the disciplines.

Policy alone does not change outcomes—implementation does. Improving adolescent literacy will require translating policy into classroom practice through high-quality instruction, targeted interventions, professional learning, and sustained support for educators. Still, the state initiatives highlighted here demonstrate a growing awareness of the adolescent literacy challenge and an increasing willingness among policymakers to act. These efforts represent important steps toward building the conditions necessary for meaningful and lasting improvement in literacy outcomes for older students.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Megan Kuhfeld is director of growth modeling and data analytics at NWEA. Her research seeks to understand students' trajectories of academic and social-emotional learning (SEL) and the school and neighborhood influences that promote optimal growth. Dr. Kuhfeld completed a doctorate in quantitative methods in education and a master's degree in statistics from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).



Dr. Naomi Duran is a research scientist at NWEA. Her research utilizes quantitative methods and large-scale, linked data to examine neighborhoods, schools, and equity in access to educational opportunities important for fostering student engagement and educational success. Prior to joining NWEA, she worked at the Learning Policy Institute and the American Institutes for Research. Dr. Duran holds an MS and PhD in human development and family studies from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.



Dr. Karyn Lewis is the vice president of research and policy partnerships at NWEA. She leads a team dedicated to generating actionable, policy-relevant research that directly addresses critical challenges in K-12 education. Her team's work is strategically focused on bridging the gap between rigorous research and practical educational improvements, ensuring that insights translate into meaningful strategies for educators, policymakers, and school leaders. Prior to joining NWEA, Dr. Lewis was a senior researcher at Education Northwest/REL Northwest and a data fellow with the Strategic Data Project at the Harvard Center for Education Policy Research. Dr. Lewis earned her PhD from the University of Oregon in social psychology.



Carrie Heath Phillips serves as Senior Director, Policy & Engagement at HMH, spearheading national and state policy strategies that support effective teaching and learning. Over the past 20 years, she has advised state education leaders, policymakers, and educators on curriculum, school improvement, and systems change through leadership roles at HMH, NWEA, and the Council of Chief State School Officers. A former elementary school teacher, Carrie is recognized for her expertise in education policy and instructional improvement. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.



Samantha Musacchia is senior vice president of policy & engagement at HMH, where she leads national policy engagement, thought leadership, and advocacy efforts. A veteran education policy leader, she works across the education ecosystem to advance strategic partnerships and provide insight on emerging policy trends.



About NWEA

For more than 40 years, NWEA has been a pioneer in educational research and assessment methodology with a focus on improving learning outcomes for every student. NWEA continues this discovery through dedicated research that explores foundational issues in education, practical challenges in today's schools, and the evolving role of technology in the lives of students. As a mission-based educational research organization, NWEA's research agenda reflects our commitment to attacking big challenges in education and measurement and empowering education stakeholders with actionable insights.



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