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Lessons from California's Early Literacy Policies

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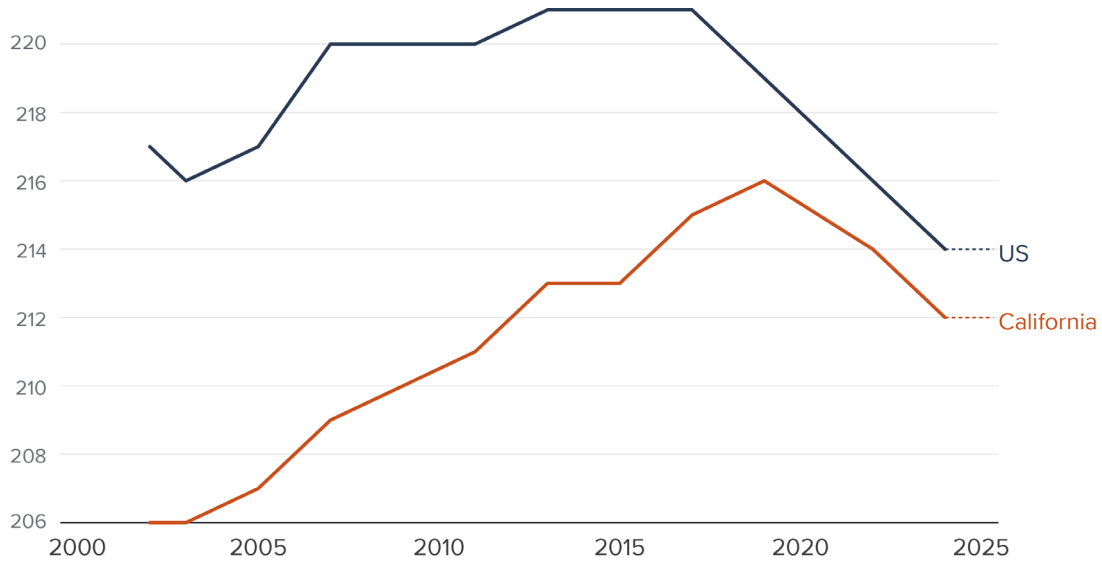
Reading is critical but remains a long-standing challenge in California schools

A student's ability to read in elementary school strongly predicts high school graduation, which in turn, predicts college-going, college completion, and earnings. Reading also enables many of life's daily tasks—from opening a bank account to obtaining health care to using public transportation.

Despite the critical role reading plays, many students lack the reading skills they need to thrive. In 2024, 40 percent of American fourth graders scored below basic—a score of 208—on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress, a standardized test sometimes known as the Nation's Report Card. This means these students cannot reliably "determine the relevant meaning of familiar words using context within the same sentence or paragraph" or "sequence or categorize events from the story."

These worrying statistics are part of a pre-existing problem that goes beyond a phenomenon wrought by the pandemic and its disruptions. On the 2019 test, 34 percent of American fourth graders could not meet the standard. California has performed worse than the national average in every year the test has been administered, although the gap has narrowed.

California has scored lower than the national average on grade 4 reading tests since the early 2000s



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress
Notes: Both the US and California score averages presented here are restricted to public school students. To achieve the NAEP Basic level, students must score at least 208 on the test. To achieve NAEP Proficient level, students must score at least 238.

Other states have passed comprehensive legislation around early literacy instruction, while California's reforms have been gradual

Forty states and the District of Columbia have passed new literacy laws since 2013. This includes Mississippi, which has been recognized nationally for its reading progress after it jumped from 49th place in 2013 for fourth-grade reading up to 9th in 2024. This improvement can be tied to a 2013 law in which the state offered all teachers trainings on evidence-based literacy instruction, mandated those trainings for teachers in low-performing schools, and aligned educator preparation programs to those techniques. The law also mandated a universal reading screener to identify and support struggling students, and retained severely struggling students in the third grade.

California has taken a different approach, implementing reforms separately to areas of instruction and targeting different groups of schools.

In 2014, the state approved the English Language Arts/English Language Development framework, which provided recommendations for integrating evidence-backed reading practices. This guidance included standards for students who speak languages other than English at home, a group that makes up more than 30 percent of California's kindergarteners. The State Board of Education approved complementary instructional materials in 2015, though schools were not required to use them nor funded to do so.

In 2020, the state funded the Early Literacy Support Block Grant (ELSBG) to provide professional development and support to the 75 lowest-performing elementary schools in the state (about $1000 per pupil per year for three years). The program improved third-grade reading performance by almost three months of learning.

The following year, the state legislature passed SB-488 to require teacher candidates pass assessments to demonstrate their understanding of evidence-based methods and for teaching programs to cover this content. The requirement, however, did not go into effect until 2025, meaning it is too early to observe effects.

Finally, SB-114 was passed in 2023. This law included a requirement for all districts to screen students in kindergarten through second grade for reading difficulties, beginning in the 2025–26 school year. The law also required districts to provide support to identified students.

The $500 million Literacy Coaches and Reading Specialists Grant is the largest of California's investments

Over 2022–23, the state allocated half a billion dollars to the Literacy Coaches and Reading Specialists Grant (LCRSG). The grant targeted funds to 818 high-need schools to improve their literacy instruction—distributing a median of $339 per student, or about $120,000 per school, each year over five years. Schools did not need to receive approval from the state for the literacy spending they chose. In the first two years of the grant,

- 58 percent of districts hired literacy coaches to improve teacher practice,
- 25 percent of districts hired reading specialists to work directly with struggling students, and
- 57 percent added professional development to supplement the offerings organized by the Sacramento County Office of Education.

Test scores for targeted schools improved by just over a month of learning in the first two years of LCRSG. Though this effect is less than half of that seen with ELSBG discussed above, LCRSG was substantially cheaper while delivering a similar ratio of cost to test score gains.

The success of both grant programs in schools whose populations were 40–45 percent English Learners is of particular note amid criticism that the science of reading movement has not sufficiently addressed the needs of multilingual learners.

The Literacy Coaches and Reading Specialists Grant offers important lessons on tackling early literacy instruction

First, the low supply of trained literacy coaches and reading specialists hinders improvement. Many districts reported challenges finding qualified staff with the appropriate licenses, especially in rural areas; these districts also reported a smaller effect on test scores. Currently, only 17 institutions statewide issue these licenses, and the cost to obtain them often exceeds state assistance that districts receive to send teachers to pursue the credentials.

Second, centralizing some decisions could speed up results. Schools spent the first year developing and posting job descriptions, sorting through possible new curricula to purchase, and soliciting proposals for professional development. If some of these functions occurred at the state level, districts could implement programs faster. The requirement in AB-1454 (2025) for the state to develop a list of high-quality instructional materials by January 2027 is a step in the right direction.

To build a path forward for improving literacy instruction and scores, the state can look to the successes and lessons of ELSBG and LCRSG. Both programs provided professional development on evidence-based reading practices and additional funding for schools to implement supports such as instructional coaching, student interventions, and monitoring for struggling students. Both programs also highlight the need for adequate staffing and centralized guidance from the state. As California rolls out a new screening tool to determine student reading difficulties and selects instructional materials, attention to areas where earlier programs stumbled will be important, or efforts to improve reading may fall short.

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