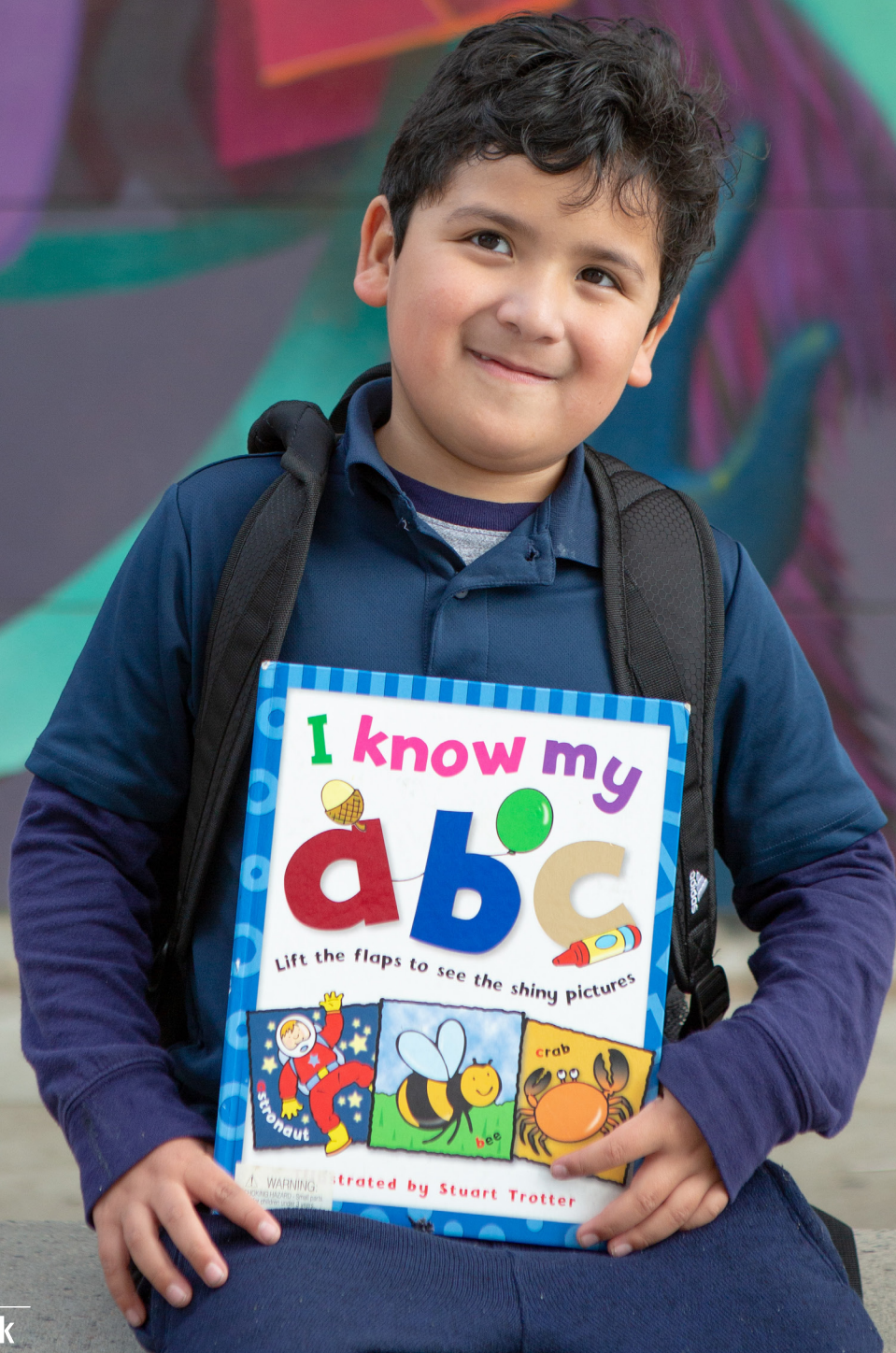


# A Call to Action: The State of Early Literacy in Monroe County

photo credit: Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimages



**R**ochester and Monroe County are rightly proud of being the home of Frederick Douglass, the renowned abolitionist, social reformer, writer, and statesman. Douglass taught himself and countless others to read and write while still enslaved, famously stating, “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.” Douglass sincerely believed literacy was the key to liberty and equality for Black people in America.

Now, 125 years after Douglass’ death, too many students in Monroe County are not being taught to read—placing their future and Douglass’s vision at risk.

The Education Trust–New York’s analysis of the state of early literacy in Monroe County reveals that a combination of low expectations for students, unstable leadership and the use of non-evidence based instructional materials and practices is denying students of their right to read.

Illiteracy is a crisis that Monroe County cannot afford to ignore any longer.

Students not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of school, with this rate doubling for Black and LatinX students living in poverty. Poor early reading outcomes also

have significant negative implications for crucial community priorities, such as poverty reduction, employment, public safety, and health.

Put simply, Monroe County will not thrive until the reading crisis is addressed.

### **The crisis is solvable.**

States and school districts across the nation are embracing decades of research about how students learn to read. This research, often called the **science of reading**, is a robust and interdisciplinary body of knowledge with the potential to dramatically improve student reading outcomes. Unfortunately, state leaders in New York have yet to prioritize either early literacy or the science of reading, leaving it to local districts and community leaders to blaze a trail forward on this critical issue that threatens both educational equity and the local economy.

While Monroe County has much work to do, bright spots and promising partnership opportunities exist. Together, education leaders and community stakeholders have the potential to improve reading outcomes and create a brighter future that fully embraces Douglass’s vision of freedom through literacy.



photo credit: Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimages

## A thorough analysis of the early literacy landscape in Monroe County revealed:

- For far too long, district and community leaders have accepted and normalized poor reading outcomes, resulting in a lack of meaningful action to address the issue.
- Countywide, less than 40% of all Monroe County students in grades 3-8 are proficient in reading, with significantly lower rates for students with disabilities, those from low-income backgrounds and students who are Black or LatinX.
- Districts in the county are slowly aligning instruction with the science of reading; however, there is not yet a coherent strategy or approach to reading instruction in many districts.
- Several districts, including those that have prioritized the science of reading, have significantly outperformed state and county reading rates for Black, Latinx, and students from low-income backgrounds.
- Inadequate teacher preparation is a major obstacle to improved reading outcomes, with most local programs missing critical coursework that prepares educators to use

evidence-based instructional materials or methods in the classroom.

- There are many opportunities to engage parents, early childhood education providers, and expanded learning organizations in the fight for improved reading outcomes.

The Education Trust–New York believes that a statewide effort on early literacy is imperative. This report is designed to build local awareness about the breadth and depth of the issue and create a sense of urgency to address this crisis. In coalition with local and statewide partners, Ed Trust–NY will leverage these and other findings to build a movement toward systemic changes in reading instruction across the state’s P-20 system of education.

LESS THAN **40%** 

of all Monroe County students in grades 3-8 are proficient in reading



photo credit: Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimg

## Reading and the Belief Gap in Monroe County

Monroe County’s ecosystem of education leaders, advocates, and policymakers must name, own, and address a persistent and widening belief gap about the ability of children to learn. The belief gap normalizes low expectations and unjustly accepts poor reading outcomes as a defining characteristic of students of color and those from low-income backgrounds.

This belief gap is egregious since research shows **95% of ALL students** — regardless of background — are cognitively capable of learning to read when

they develop the foundational skills. Yet, in Monroe County, 95% of students at some schools are NOT reading proficiently and reading outcomes are well below the 95% threshold, even amongst the highest performing schools.

All children can learn to read. Aligning classroom practice with the science of reading is an essential step to better reading outcomes, but it will mean nothing if we do not work to shift the beliefs of those working with students.



photo credit: Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUImages

# Student Reading Outcomes in Monroe County



Many school leaders and advocates were concerned about the impact of pandemic-related school closures on student learning. In the fall of 2022, new state, federal, and local data revealed what many feared. Students across the county, state, and nation are struggling to read.


The data shows a county-wide reading crisis with far-reaching consequences. The crisis has the potential to worsen without immediate action, as the cohort of students who experienced interrupted instruction from the pandemic move through the K-12 system without foundational skills.

Assessment scores are not a complete measure of what students know and are able to do and poor reading outcomes in Monroe County were commonplace long before the pandemic. However, the most recent data provides an objective and comparative view of current student achievement.

Local assessment data reveals similar trends. For example, **fall 2022** data from the Rochester City School Districts revealed that only 8% of students in grades K-8 are reading at grade level, with 52% of fourth grade students three or more grade levels behind, double the rate of similar urban districts across the nation.

## Key student outcome data regarding literacy in Monroe County shows:

**38%**  of all Monroe County third graders are proficient in English Language Arts (ELA).  Aggregate proficiency rates in the third-eighth grades are similar to those in third grade.

 Third grade county-wide reading proficiency rates are significantly lower for historically underserved students compared to their White peers.




## At the district level, data shows:

Third grade ELA proficiency rates ranged from 11% in Rochester to 75% in Pittsford.

**11%-75%**

**35%** 

Even in high-performing districts such as Pittsford, Brighton, and Fairport, low-income students performed below the statewide average of 35%.

Several districts,  including Rush-Henrietta, Penfield, and West Irondequoit significantly outperformed the state and countywide averages for third grade Black and Hispanic students, and those from low-income backgrounds.

# Monroe County Third Grade Reading Proficiency Rates, 2018-2019

The charts below provide state ELA proficiency rates from the 2018-19 school year, the last year of testing before the pandemic, and 2021-22, the most recent ELA proficiency data available.

Grade 3 2018-2019	All Students	White Students	Black Students	Hispanic Students	Students with Disabilities	English Language Learners	Low- Income Students
NYS Average	52%	58%	45%	43%	21%	20%	42%
Monroe County	45%	58%	25%	28%	9%	10%	28%
Rochester	18%	34%	18%	14%	3%	5%	16%
Brighton	61%	67%	30%	53%	29%	6%	40%
Brockport	53%	50%	n/a	63%	13%	40%	45%
Churchville- Chili	50%	55%	20%	n/a	7%	n/a	39%
East Irondequoit	40%	48%	36%	33%	n/a	15%	31%
East Rochester	43%	51%	n/a	n/a	10%	n/a	38%
Fairport	43%	57%	36%	33%	11%	6%	27%
Gates Chili	37%	41%	26%	40%	4%	9%	29%
Greece	40%	47%	21%	30%	5%	16%	27%
Hilton	58%	59%	50%	55%	33%	n/a	45%
Honeoye Falls	64%	63%	n/a	n/a	25%	n/a	41%
Penfield	74%	74%	47%	77%	13%	29%	58%
Pittsford	85%	84%	80%	74%	31%	n/a	67%
Rush Henrietta	57%	62%	45%	39%	14%	24%	43%
Spencerport	49%	53%	n/a	41%	15%	n/a	40%
Webster	58%	59%	12%	49%	13%	8%	34%
West Irondequoit	67%	72%	53%	38%	22%	22%	50%
Wheatland Chili	21%	27%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	13%

<b>Grades 3-8 2018-2019</b>	<b>All Students</b>	<b>White Students</b>	<b>Black Students</b>	<b>Hispanic Students</b>	<b>Students with Disabilities</b>	<b>English Language Learners</b>	<b>Low- Income Students</b>
<b>NYS Average</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>Monroe County</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Rochester</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Brighton</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Brockport</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>32%</b>
<b>Churchville- Chili</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>27%</b>
<b>East Irondequoit</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>East Rochester</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b>Fairport</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>Gates Chili</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>Greece</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Hilton</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>35%</b>
<b>Honeoye Falls</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Penfield</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>47%</b>
<b>Pittsford</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>49%</b>
<b>Rush Henrietta</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>33%</b>
<b>Spencerport</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>29%</b>
<b>Webster</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>29%</b>
<b>West Irondequoit</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>39%</b>
<b>Wheatland Chili</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>20%</b>

# Monroe County Third Grade Reading Proficiency Rates, 2021-2022

Grade 3 2021-2022	All Students	White Students	Black Students	Hispanic Students	Students with Disabilities	English Language Learners	Low- Income Students
NYS Average	46%	51%	37%	36%	18%	22%	35%
Monroe County	38%	51%	17%	22%	7%	n/a	21%
Rochester	11%	28%	9%	8%	3%	8%	9%
Brighton	49%	49%	29%	50%	12%	14%	27%
Brockport	45%	46%	0%	41%	9%	0%	38%
Churchville- Chili	40%	43%	13%	40%	4%	0%	20%
East Irondequoit	21%	21%	15%	26%	0%	0%	16%
East Rochester	47%	53%	0%	0%	0%	0%	29%
Fairport	49%	50%	25%	59%	9%	33%	32%
Gates Chili	24%	27%	17%	22%	4%	6%	16%
Greece	32%	38%	17%	21%	3%	13%	23%
Hilton	48%	48%	0%	58%	13%	0%	40%
Honeoye Falls	74%	75%	0%	0%	38%	0%	59%
Penfield	70%	70%	50%	61%	13%	22%	53%
Pittsford	75%	77%	29%	48%	35%	38%	33%
Rush Henrietta	53%	55%	45%	69%	11%	46%	44%
Spencerport	30%	33%	0%	24%	0%	8%	16%
Webster	49%	52%	0%	33%	3%	21%	0%
West Irondequoit	65%	71%	45%	50%	14%	20%	51%
Wheatland Chili	44%	50%	14%	0%	0%	0%	30%

**Grades 3-8  
2021-2022**

	All Students	White Students	Black Students	Hispanic Students	Students with Disabilities	English Language Learners	Low-Income Students
<b>NYS Average</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>37%</b>
<b>Monroe County</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>Rochester</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Brighton</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>46%</b>
<b>Brockport</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>Churchville-Chili</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>29%</b>
<b>East Irondequoit</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>29%</b>
<b>East Rochester</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>Fairport</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>29%</b>
<b>Gates Chili</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>32%</b>
<b>Greece</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b>Hilton</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>30%</b>
<b>Honeoye Falls</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>55%</b>
<b>Penfield</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>47%</b>
<b>Pittsford</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Rush Henrietta</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Spencerport</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b>Webster</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>West Irondequoit</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>42%</b>
<b>Wheatland Chili</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>27%</b>

## Early Literacy in Monroe County Schools

Monroe County is comprised of 18 school districts serving nearly 100,000 students. Districts across the county are becoming increasingly diverse, with 48% of students identifying as non-White and 49% of students classified as economically disadvantaged by the state.

Ed Trust–NY surveyed the 18 school districts in Monroe County to better understand how reading is being taught to students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The survey focused on understanding how the **reading wars**, a long-standing debate over how to teach children to read, impacts curriculum use.

As of June 2023, 13 districts responded to the survey. While responses were voluntary, such opaqueness makes it difficult for parents and taxpayers to know what curriculum and reading approach their district is using. Although many districts are slowly moving toward a more evidence-based, structured literacy approach, the survey responses paint a complex and uneven picture of districts' alignment with the science of reading.

Rochester City School District (RCSD), the largest district in Monroe County and serving the greatest share of students from low-income backgrounds, provides an example of the slow but uneven shift toward the science of reading across the county. In 2020, **RCSD adopted** Savaas Learning's myView Literacy as the district's sole K-5 reading curriculum. This program is aligned with the science of reading and has received good reviews from independent reviewers. Yet, at the same time, the **RCSD website** touts a balanced literacy framework that includes multiple instructional resources, including Lucy Calkins Reading and Writing, a curriculum that has been proven to be ineffective. This incoherent approach, which likely varies by school, can present problems for a mobile student population that moves between schools, such as RCSD. Other districts, such as Penfield, implement a more coherent early literacy approach, ensuring that all classrooms use

the same curriculum, allowing for more aligned professional learning and increased collaboration between teachers.

The following table is a snapshot of early literacy instruction across Monroe County. As background, Balanced Literacy refers to an approach which focuses on exposure to literacy to develop a love of reading but has been proven to be ineffective in teaching most kids to read, while Structured Literacy refers to the application of knowledge from the science of reading which teaches children to read in an evidence-based and systematic way. A mixed approach refers to a combination of both structured and balanced approaches.



## Early Literacy Instruction in Monroe County

District	Curriculum	Transparency	Approach*
<b>Brighton</b>	No response to survey	Limited	Mixed, moving to structured
<b>Brockport</b>	HMH Into Reading	Limited	Mixed
<b>Churchville-Chili</b>	Next Steps to Guided Reading, Reading Recovery	Good	Balanced Literacy
<b>East Irondequoit</b>	Wit and Wisdom (starting in 23-24 school year)	Limited	Structured Literacy
<b>East Rochester</b>	Heggerty, Wilson, Geodes, Lucy Calkins	Limited	Mixed
<b>Fairport</b>	Locally developed	Limited	Mixed, moving to structured
<b>Gates-Chili</b>	Foundations, Heggerty	Limited	Mixed, moving to structured
<b>Greece</b>	CKLA and Engage NY	Limited	Structured Literacy
<b>Hilton</b>	Locally developed and Reading Recovery	Limited	Balanced Literacy
<b>Honeoye Falls</b>	Locally developed	Good	Structured Literacy
<b>Penfield</b>	Superkids	Good	Structured Literacy
<b>Pittsford</b>	Locally developed and Fountas and Pinnell	Good	Balanced Literacy
<b>Rochester</b>	myView, Lucy Calkins, EL	Good	Mixed
<b>Rush-Henrietta</b>	Wilson, Heggerty, Geodes, SAVVAS ReadyGen	Good	Structured Literacy
<b>Spencerport</b>	Locally developed	Good	Mixed, moving to Structured
<b>Webster</b>	Wilson, Heggerty, Amplify CKLA, Wit and Wisdom, Geodes	Limited	Structured Literacy
<b>West Irondequoit</b>	No response	Limited	Unclear
<b>Wheatland-Chili</b>	Scholastic Literacy	Limited	Unclear

*These findings are the result of Ed Trust-NY outreach to each district multiple times, including through a Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) request, and a review of district websites.*



photo credit: Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimages

## Teacher Preparation in Monroe County

Teacher preparation programs are a major obstacle to improved reading outcomes, with the majority of new teachers in New York State not being trained in either the science of reading or how to use evidence-based instructional resources in the classroom. As a result, districts that adopt a structured literacy approach have to retrain teachers, requiring significant investments of time and money.

The National Center for Teacher Quality issued two reports on teacher preparation program alignment with the science of reading across New York, **one in 2020** and another in **June 2023**. Both reports reveal that the majority of teacher preparation programs are not preparing teachers to provide evidence-based reading instruction. Specifically, 71% of programs received a failing grade in teaching the science of reading in 2023 compared to 67% in 2020.

This trend is also happening here in Monroe County as shown by the chart below.

Better reading outcomes rely upon well-trained educators who are empowered by high-quality preparation, training, and support. Yet too many teachers across Monroe County are entering the classroom without any knowledge or training in the science of reading, making it difficult to teach students how to read. While this disconnect is common across the nation, local higher education leaders have yet to make changes in their teacher preparation programs to ensure teachers are prepared to provide evidence-based literacy instruction.

### Sources:

\* [https://www.nctq.org/review/standardScores/Early-Reading\\_-NY-](https://www.nctq.org/review/standardScores/Early-Reading_-NY-)

\*\* <https://www.nctq.org/review/standardScores/Reading-Foundations>

\*\*\* <https://teachroc.org/teacher-preparation-programs/>

College	2020 grade*	2023 grade**	Notes	Teacher Candidates***
Brockport	F	F	Balanced literacy approach	1,000
Roberts Wesleyan	B	F*	Appealing score, aligned with science of reading	400
Geneseo	D	D	Working to align with science of reading	900
University of Rochester	D	No grade	Did not submit information in 2023	45-70
St. John Fisher (Undergraduate)	D	No grade	Did not submit information in 2023	300 (UG and G)
St. John Fisher (Graduate)	D	No grade	Did not submit information in 2023	300 (UG and G)
Nazareth (Undergraduate)	B	No grade	Did not submit information in 2023	325 (UG and G)
Nazareth (Graduate)	D	No grade	Did not submit information in 2023	325 (UG and G)

## Promising Practices and a Holistic Approach

While recent assessment data and other challenges paint a grim picture of early literacy in Monroe County, there are many innovative programs to celebrate and learn from. At the same time, there are ample opportunities for parents and community partners to play key roles in developing student reading skills, beginning at birth. This extra support and time outside the school day and year are particularly important as students continue to recover from lost instructional time related to the pandemic. There are several key strategies that can be employed, including tutoring, summer and afterschool programs, and family engagement.

### *The Role of Parents*

Parents and caregivers are their child's first teachers and play a vital role in their child's reading success, particularly in the early years. When caregivers know how to support their child's reading, there is enormous potential. Yet too often, parents in Monroe County do not have access to the best tools and resources to support reading development, leaving them feeling unprepared to support their little learner's needs. Fortunately, Rochester and Monroe County have many organizations focused on empowering parents to both advocate for their child and support their reading development. Parents and caregivers can learn more about supporting their young reader [here](#).

### *K-12: Penfield Central School District*

Penfield's work with the Science of Reading began by training **all** kindergarten through fifth grade educators, including classroom teachers, literacy specialists, special educators, English as a new language providers, speech language pathologists, and administrators in the foundational elements of the science of reading. Penfield started by ensuring that all educators understood that 95% of children can learn to read and that the district was not there **yet**. District leaders also debunked the idea that reading is a natural process and children will intuitively know how to lift the words off the page.

Penfield then piloted and ultimately implemented strong core kindergarten through second grade resources aligned to the science of reading. Kindergarten through fifth grade interventionists and special educators refined their practices and resources to align with the science of reading. Simultaneously, kindergarten through fifth grade educators developed a knowledge rich curriculum that centered on building background knowledge and vocabulary related to the kindergarten through fifth grade New York State social studies and science standards and social-emotional benchmarks.

Penfield also provided ongoing professional learning to support educators in the practical application of the science of reading and workshops were offered via an individualized learning pathway to faculty.

Penfield's work was systemic. It did not rely on one passionate teacher. The district decided to build a system in which all children were guaranteed access to strong core instruction and appropriate interventions. Ultimately, the combination of high-quality professional development focused on research-based reading strategies, coupled with access to resources aligned to scientific evidence resulted in stronger reading outcomes for all students.

### *Teacher Preparation: Roberts Wesleyan University*

The Literacy Education Master of Education Program at Roberts Wesleyan University builds on teachers' existing expertise to prepare them to serve as literacy specialists. The goal of the program is to build their content and pedagogical knowledge regarding teaching literacy: reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, visual representing, and critical thinking all applied in a social context.

Roberts Wesleyan educates aspiring literacy specialists in elements of language that they will explicitly and systematically teach. This

includes teaching and learning about the “Big 5” (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension) outlined in the National Reading Panel Report (2000) and in other current research often referred to as the science of reading. Aspiring literacy specialists also participate in 100 hours of practical application connecting theory and practice, including “Assessment Driven Instruction,” where they utilize literacy assessments and analyze assessment data to provide research-based, code-emphasis intervention for students experiencing difficulty in kindergarten through second grades.

Graduates report being prepared to teach individuals how to read as well as remediate reading difficulties. One graduate in particular attended LETRS training as part of her school district’s professional development, a course designed to teach educators about the science of reading. The teacher reported that while most educators in the training were unfamiliar with the content and pedagogical knowledge presented, she had already learned much of what was taught during her time at Roberts Wesleyan.

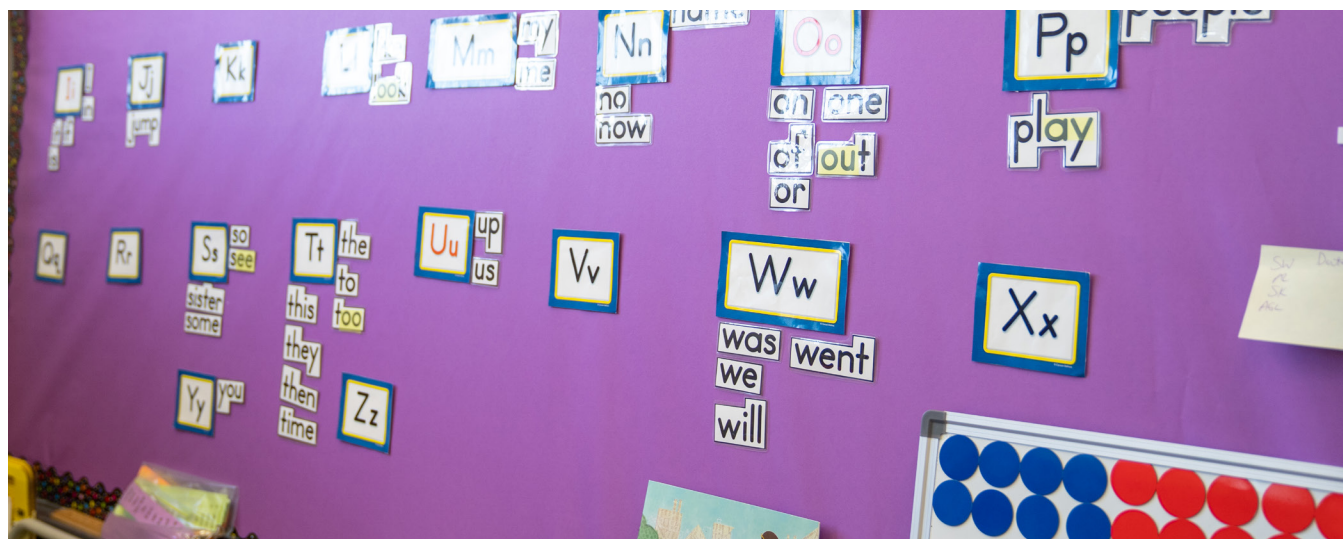
### **Early Childhood: Hoekelman Center at University of Rochester Medical Center**

With the help of local funders, community stakeholders, and the GOALS umbrella, **the Hoekelman Center** has undertaken work to understand local parent and teacher attitudes and

knowledge around early literacy as well as exploring the feasibility of providing specific early literacy tools to families and pre-K classrooms in the hopes of improving kindergarten readiness, an early predictor of school success. The center is currently partnering with **Volunteers of America Children’s Center** to evaluate whether giving ABC toys to pre-kindergarteners improves emergent literacy scores and overall kindergarten readiness.

### **Expanded Learning: Greater Rochester Summer Learning Association**

Strong school-community partnerships must be a key component of a comprehensive early literacy strategy and can include tutoring, community schools, summer, and afterschool programming. The **Greater Rochester Summer Learning Association (GRSLA)** works to both improve Kindergarten readiness and early literacy and math skills. Prior to the pandemic, GRSLA was serving 1,500 Expanded Pre-K to 8th grade students in 100 classrooms across 23 sites, including private schools, public schools, colleges, and Pre-K centers. Data from summer programming in 2015-19 showed significant improvements in kindergarten readiness for participating students. GRSLA is now focused exclusively on supporting Pre-K students during the summer before kindergarten to eliminate summer learning loss and boost Kindergarten readiness, which can significantly improve early reading outcomes.



# Recommendations

As state level leaders orient themselves on ways to solve this crisis, it is up to local leaders in the home of Frederick Douglass to ensure that every student in Monroe County has the right to read. This can be accomplished by a bold, community-wide plan that incorporates these key components:

- 1 Invest in strong and sustainable leadership in Rochester.** The Rochester City School District has had **seven different superintendents** in the last ten years. Such inconsistency led to incoherent instructional strategies, disconnection from community priorities, and ultimately poor outcomes for children. State monitoring of RCSD should ensure all schools and classrooms have top talent that can provide evidence-based instruction to all students. State education leaders should also support RCSD leadership to make tough decisions that will turn the district around and ensure that all students can read at grade level by the end of third grade.
- 2 Provide a literacy coach for every school.** All schools, particularly those with weak literacy outcomes, need a literacy coach trained or certified in evidence-based reading instruction. BOCES and other district and higher education leaders should work to develop a cadre of reading coaches and training programs that can work in districts across the county to improve reading outcomes.
- 3 Ensure that every school in the county is using evidence-based reading materials** by building awareness about the pedagogy aligned to the science of reading with district leaders and school boards. Parents, advocates, and other community stakeholders should pay special attention to districts that are currently using non-evidence based instructional materials and urge that they be replaced with evidence-based resources.
- 4 Every elementary school should have a coherent literacy plan.** As many districts shift toward evidence-based literacy instruction, some employ multiple and sometimes contradictory instructional strategies and programs that can confuse students. This is especially concerning in districts with high student mobility. **Penfield Central Schools** offers a comprehensive model of a coherent strategy that ensures all educators work together to improve reading outcomes.
- 5 Align professional learning to high quality evidence-based learning materials.** Curriculum is important but will not improve student outcomes without aligned professional learning that provides teachers with opportunities to use evidence-based instructional resources in the classroom. Districts should provide training for all kindergarten through fifth grade teachers in the science of reading and five pillars of reading instruction through programs such as LETRS or less intensive programs being developed by SUNY and others. Additionally, teachers serving students in grades fourth through eighth will require support to fortify foundational reading skills for challenged readers.
- 6 Align teacher preparation programs in Monroe County with science.** Most teacher preparation programs in the county are not aligned with the science of reading, resulting in local teachers not being prepared to teach reading in their schools. To address this,

teacher preparation programs should require aspiring elementary teachers to complete coursework aligned to the science of reading and five pillars of reading instruction, while also developing partnerships with districts that have adopted the science of reading to create aligned pre-service opportunities for aspiring teachers.

7

**Institute systems for progress monitoring within and across schools and districts.**

To ensure students are reading at grade level by third grade, districts must provide frequent opportunities to monitor student progress beginning in kindergarten. This includes providing Kindergarten Readiness Assessments (KRAs) to all students and regular, formative assessments in kindergarten through third grade to monitor student literacy development and adjust instruction based on student data. Finally, districts should explore the creation of individualized reading plans for the most challenged readers and share that information with parents.

8

**Improve public transparency for parents and taxpayers.** It is much too difficult for parents, advocates, and taxpayers to find information about how their school is teaching reading and how their students are performing, particularly in grades kindergarten through second. Currently, the state does not collect this information and there is no requirement for districts to make curriculum and other instructional resources publicly accessible. To address this, all districts should make their reading curriculum and instructional approach publicly accessible on their district websites and public facing documents.

9

**Meaningfully engage families and caregivers.**

Parents and caregivers can play a critical role in supporting their child’s reading development and districts should provide families with evidence-based resources and tools that can be used at home to support their child, while also providing regular updates to families on their child’s reading progress. At the same time, community partners should empower parents to advocate for the use of evidence-based instruction at their child’s school.

10

**Partner with community-based organizations.**

To help students catch up on pandemic-related unfinished learning, districts should provide funding to community partners with the capacity to improve reading development through tutoring, summer, and afterschool programs.



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## Conclusion

The devastating consequences of illiteracy are detrimental to students and communities. In Monroe County, illiteracy leads to higher dropout rates and increases in poverty, crime, unemployment, and incarceration, all of which limit the possibilities of far too many students — especially students of color and those from low-income backgrounds. Monroe County can stop this crisis in its tracks by ensuring that every teacher is equipped with the tools and training that will ensure at least 95% of students can read at grade level by the end of third grade.

Importantly, schools cannot do this work on their own. Community leaders should continue to develop a Birth-Age 8 approach that includes developmental screenings to identify possible learning challenges.

School and community leaders should also ensure that parents and child care providers have access to tools that promote vocabulary development, such as book-rich environments and language-rich adult-child interactions.

Finally, successfully improving early reading outcomes will take a communitywide effort that makes literacy a top priority. This includes a countywide campaign to build awareness and support of early literacy with parents, teachers, students, and community members. As Douglass famously stated, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” This is Rochester and Monroe County’s opportunity to build strong children by providing them with the gift of literacy that they all so richly deserve.

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Florence M. Muller Foundation



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