

Every Grade Counts

The State of Adolescent Literacy in New York

As New York begins to embrace evidence-based literacy instruction and the science of reading in the early grades, state and local leaders must act to support a long-overlooked group of students: adolescent learners who struggle with reading in middle and high school.

State and federal data expose a hidden crisis affecting thousands of New York students. The 2023-24 New York State ELA Assessment shows that 48%, more than 70,000 8th graders, did not reach reading proficiency. Even more troubling, the 2024 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) [reports](#) that 35% of New York 8th graders scored Below Basic in Reading. This score reflects performance below the lowest NAEP level and indicates that these students lack even partial mastery of essential literacy skills. Among students of color, the data is even more alarming: 42% of Black students and 47% of Latinx students fell into the Below Basic category, revealing widespread reading challenges.

35%

of New York 8th graders scored Below Basic in Reading on the 2024 NAEP

This crisis directly relates to school and community outcomes, such as graduation rates, chronic absenteeism, under-employment, poverty and health. Even more urgently, it impacts students' academic, social, and emotional well-being.

Imagine being one of the over 70,000 New York 8th graders who can't read at grade level. Imagine the anxiety of being asked to read aloud, the frustration of falling behind in other subjects, or the shame of not being able to join classroom conversations about books and texts. Many students respond by shutting down, acting out, or avoiding school altogether just to protect themselves. These reading struggles are not their fault, many adolescent learners simply never received effective reading instruction.

In this report, we build on our 2023 report, [The State of Early Literacy in New York](#), to raise awareness and urgency about the literacy crisis facing older students across New York. We highlight promising practices in adolescent literacy from across New York and the nation and we offer a blueprint for education leaders to support these students at both the state and district levels.

By sharing and understanding these findings, New York can take the first step toward improving reading outcomes and securing a brighter future for older students. EdTrust-New York, the [New York Campaign for Early Literacy](#), and our partners across the state remain committed to advancing a movement that ensures every New York student, from prekindergarten through 12th grade, receives instruction aligned with the science of reading and builds the literacy skills needed to thrive.

New York's Changing Literacy Landscape

New York education leaders are slowly embracing the science of reading, which [the Reading League](#) defines as:

“...a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing. This research has been conducted over the last five decades across the world, and it is derived from thousands of studies conducted in multiple languages. The science of reading has culminated in a preponderance of evidence to inform how proficient reading and writing develop; why some have difficulty; and how we can most effectively assess and teach and, therefore, improve student outcomes through prevention of and intervention for reading difficulties.”

The research clearly shows that 95% of all students are cognitively capable of learning to read when they receive instruction aligned with the science of reading. Despite researchers having established this body of evidence over 50 years ago, our previous report on early literacy revealed that far too many school districts and teacher preparation programs across the state fail to teach reading aligned with this research. In fact, New York has lagged behind nearly every other state in aligning state policy with the science of reading. Meanwhile, states like [Mississippi](#) and [Louisiana](#) began investing in this approach over a decade ago and have significantly improved student reading outcomes as a result.



These findings helped drive the state's first major investment in the science of reading: the [2024 Back to Basics law](#), introduced by Governor Kathy Hochul. The law allocated \$10 million for professional learning in the science of reading for current educators and required all elementary schools to adopt this curriculum-aligned approach by September 2025. This modest initial investment, along with other efforts to align educator preparation programs with the science of reading, marks the beginning of a shift in literacy instruction across New York.

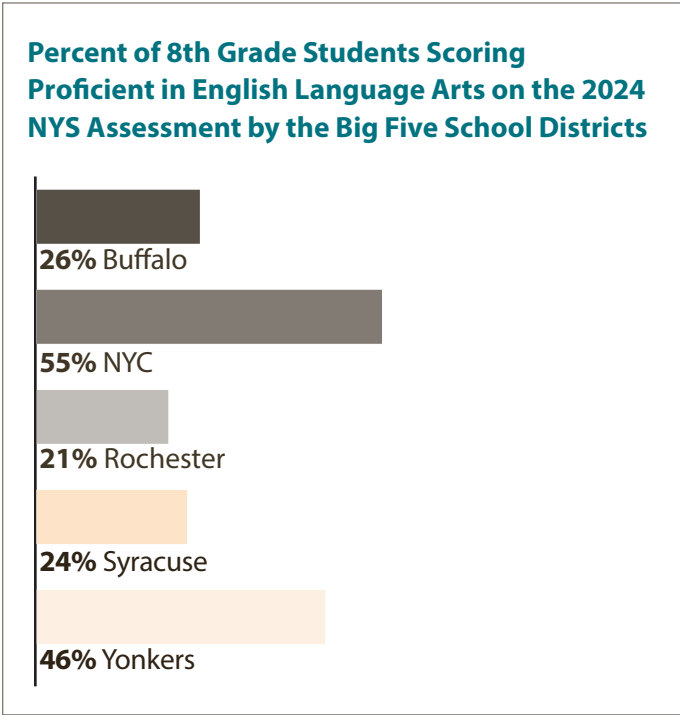
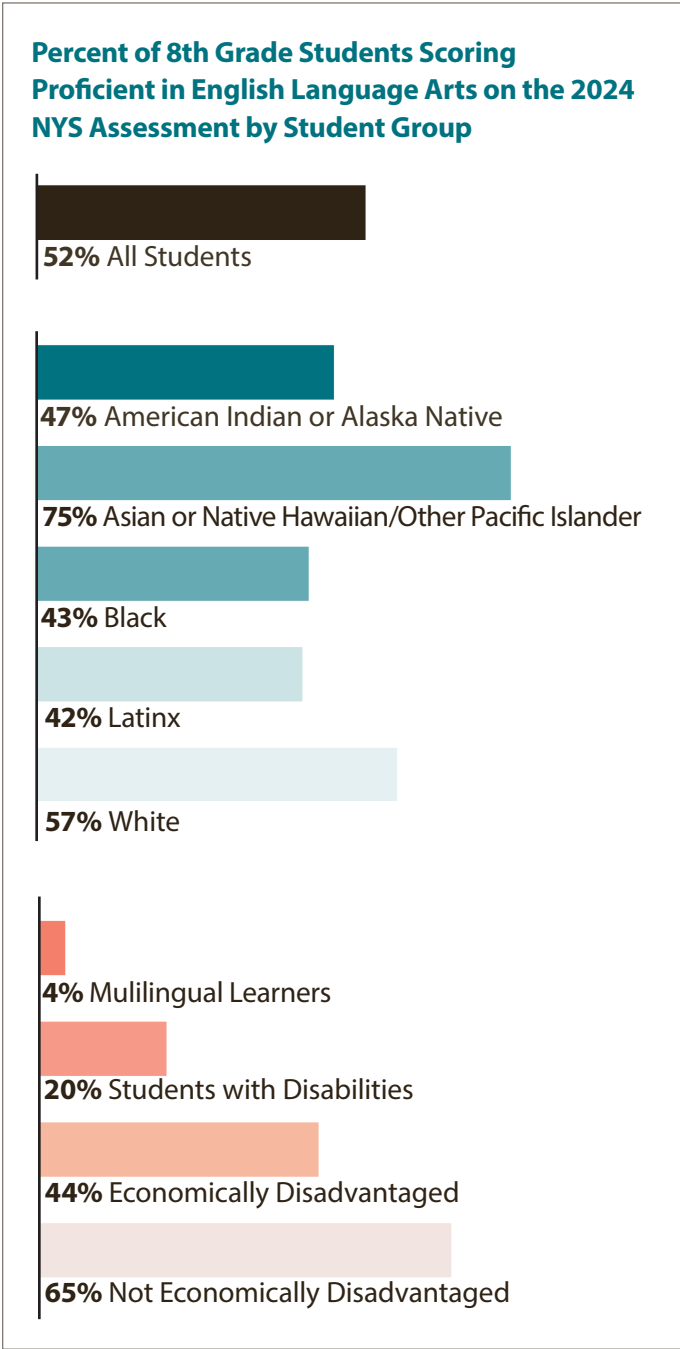
These efforts have focused on the early grades to increase the number of students reading proficiently by the end of 3rd grade, a crucial transition from learning to read to reading to learn. However, the science of reading makes it clear that educators can teach students to read at any age. Although New York remains behind many other states in early literacy reform, the state now has an opportunity to lead the nation in supporting adolescent students who struggle with reading. Few states have addressed this challenge at scale, but promising practices already exist both in New York and across the country.

With strategic policy and targeted investments, New York can and must ensure that older students who have been denied the right to read receive the instruction, support, and resources they need to build literacy and thrive, both academically and in life.

8th Grade Student Reading Outcomes in New York

Students across all grade levels in New York are experiencing a reading crisis. While recent attention has focused on 3rd grade reading outcomes, 8th grade reading skills play a critical and often overlooked role in determining future student success. When students lack strong reading skills, they struggle in high school coursework. They find it difficult to analyze math word problems, follow science lab instructions, and interpret primary source materials in social studies. These challenges directly impact their ability to succeed beyond high school, leading many graduates to require remedial courses in college or fail to pass workforce entry exams.

Although New York leads the nation in per-student spending, far too many 8th graders continue to struggle with reading, as the data below demonstrates:

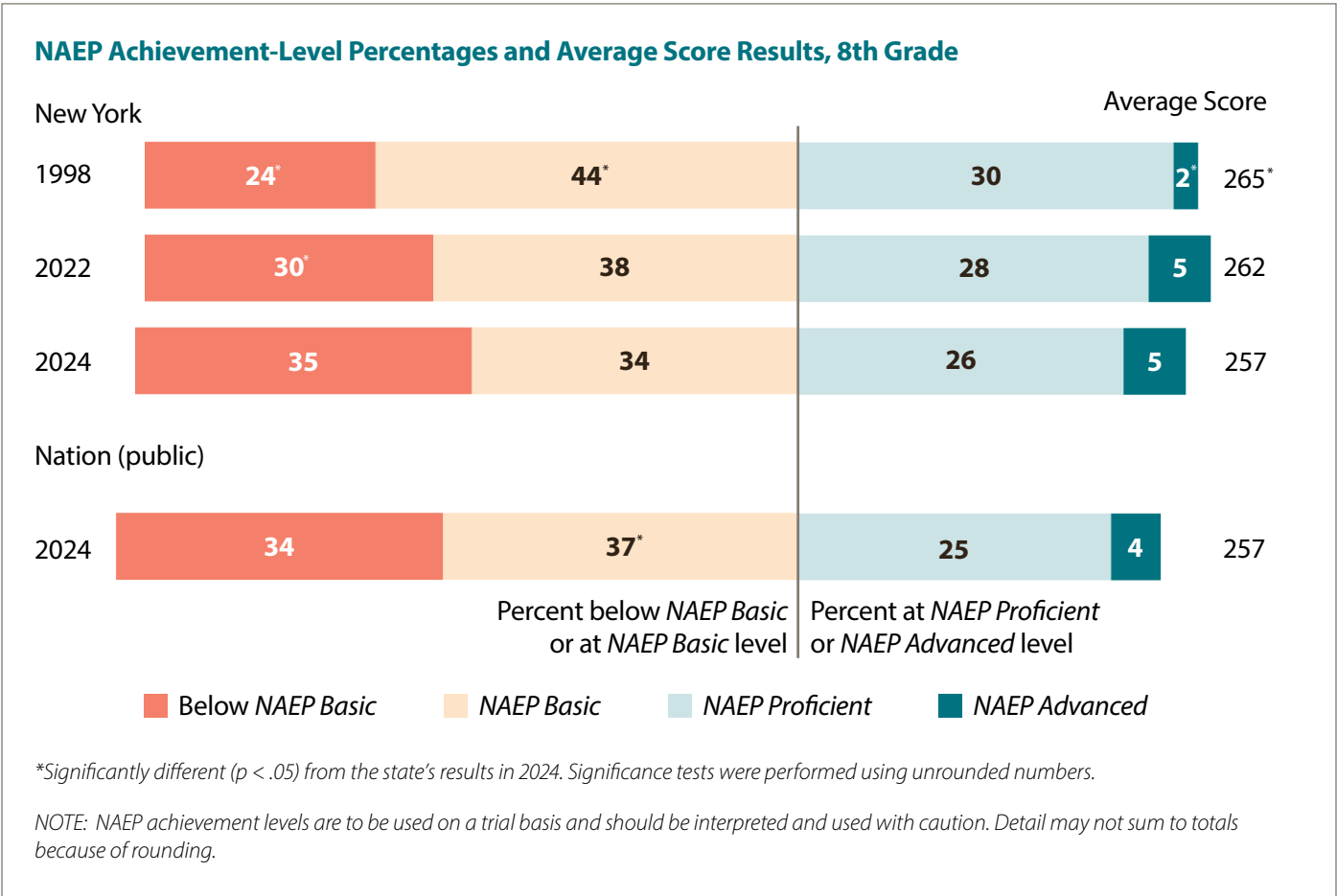


New York’s National Assessment of Educational Progress Data

NAEP Achievement Levels

- Students performing at the **NAEP Basic** level have partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for performance at the NAEP Proficient level.
- Students performing at the **NAEP Proficient** level have demonstrated competency over challenging material, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills.
- Students performing at the **NAEP Advanced** level have shown superior performance.

- In 2024, only 31% of New York students performed at or above the NAEP Proficient level, **a figure that shows no significant improvement since 1998, when 32% reached that benchmark.**
- Meanwhile, 65% of students scored at or above the NAEP Basic level in 2024, **a decline from 76% in 1998.**
- Most concerning, 35% of New York **students scored below the Basic level.** These students could not identify fundamental literary elements such as the order of events, character traits, or the main idea.



Students of color, those from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and Multilingual Learners continue to face disproportionately lower outcomes on the NAEP, an alarming trend.

- More than one-third of 8th grade students [scored](#) Below Basic in reading. Among them, 42% of Black 8th graders and 47% of Latinx 8th graders fell into this lowest proficiency category.
- In 2024, economically disadvantaged students [scored](#), on average, 23 points lower than their peers who were not economically disadvantaged. This performance gap has barely changed since 1998, when the gap measured 25 points.

Results for Student Groups in 2024

Reporting Groups	Percentage of Students	Avg. Score	Percentage at or above NAEP		Percentage at NAEP
			Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Race/ethnicity					
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	‡	‡	‡	‡
Asian	10	279	83	51	13
Black	16	248	58	21	2
Hispanic	30	243	53	21	2
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	#	‡	‡	‡	‡
Two or More Races	3	‡	‡	‡	‡
White	40	265	72	37	7
Gender					
Male	51	253	62	28	4
Female	49	261	68	34	6
Economically disadvantaged status					
Economically disadvantaged	54	247	56	22	3
Not economically disadvantaged	40	270	76	42	8

Rounds to zero.
‡ Reporting standards not met.
NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding, and because the “information not available” category for the Economically Disadvantaged Status is not displayed. Black includes African American and Hispanic includes Latino. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin.

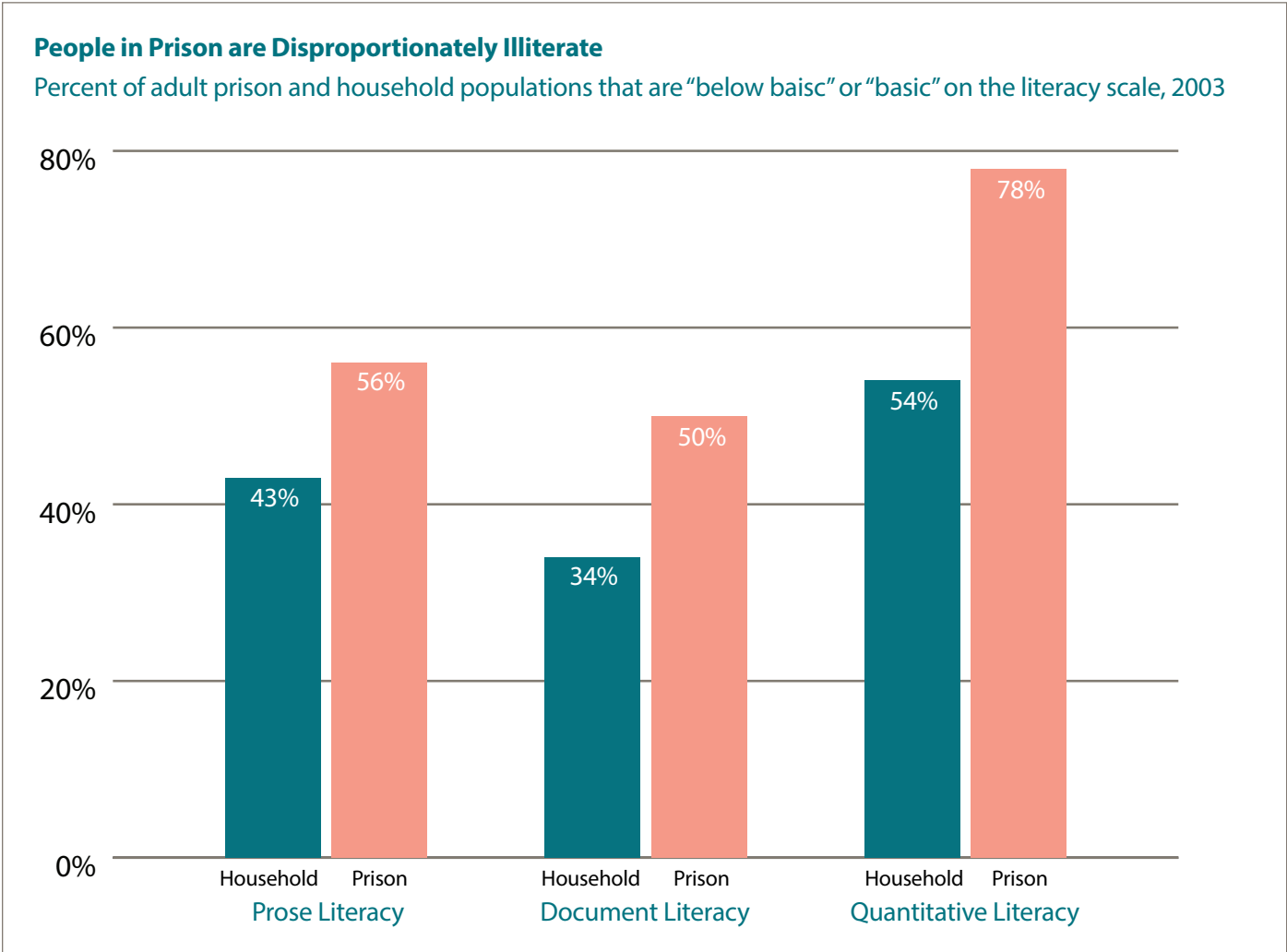
What’s at Stake When We Don’t Address Adolescent Literacy?

What happens to struggling readers after they leave the K-12 school systems? If no one addresses their needs, the cumulative effects of low literacy can limit their access to [higher education and career opportunities](#). Even if students with reading difficulties gain admission to college, institutions often place them in remedial courses. These courses may not carry credit, extend the time and cost of earning a degree, and [increase the likelihood that students will drop out, making them less competitive in the job market](#).

When students do not receive the support they need to become strong readers, it impacts their long-term educational and career opportunities. A [report](#) commissioned by the Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network found that limited literacy skills hinder career advancement and reduce productivity. This lack of productivity costs employers an estimated \$46 billion annually in lost revenue.

According to a 2020 [report](#) from the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, one-third of adults with low literacy are unemployed. Those who do work earn an average of \$34,000 per year, nearly half the income of adults with higher literacy skills.

While researchers frequently cite school discipline policies when examining the school-to-prison pipeline, literacy plays a significant role as well. There is a [correlation between literacy and incarceration](#): Over 70% of individuals incarcerated in U.S. prisons cannot read above a 4th grade level.



Low literacy imposes significant burdens on both New York and the entire country. [According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy](#), over 90 million Americans struggle to understand even basic health information. This widespread challenge leads to poorer health outcomes, higher mortality rates, increased use of hospital services, and substantial economic costs. Experts [estimate](#) that low health literacy costs the nation between \$105 and \$238 billion each year.

Why Do Some Adolescent Students Struggle with Reading?

Many adolescent learners struggle with reading due to a mix of developmental, instructional, social, and systemic factors. These include:

- **Gaps in Foundational Literacy Skills:** Many students never received essential instruction aligned with the science of reading, especially in the early grades, leaving them without basic skills in phonics, fluency, or vocabulary. Pandemic-related disruptions have only widened these gaps. For immigrant students, particularly Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE), missed years of schooling may mean they never learned to read in their native language.
- **Insufficient Reading Instruction and Support in Upper Grades:** By middle and high school, schools often shift reading instruction toward content knowledge, assuming students already read proficiently. Students who lacked evidence-based reading instruction in elementary school may rely on guessing strategies rather than decoding unfamiliar words. Yet, without universal screeners or targeted interventions, teachers may not even recognize these issues. Most secondary teachers receive little to no training in reading instruction, and few schools offer remedial or explicit literacy support for older students.
- **Increasing text complexity:** As students move through secondary school, they encounter texts with more complex vocabulary, structure, and abstract concepts. Many students struggle to navigate these demands or to adjust their reading strategies for different subjects.
- **Undiagnosed Learning Disabilities:** Some students reach adolescence without diagnoses for learning challenges like dyslexia or ADHD. As reading demands increase, these students may face significant difficulty. Others may struggle with executive functioning skills that affect comprehension and retention.
- **Inequities in Education Systems:** Students in under-resourced schools often lack access to high-quality reading instruction, intervention programs, and trained literacy specialists. These systemic inequities disproportionately affect Black and Latinx students and those from low-income backgrounds. Data consistently show that students who need the most support in middle and high school tend to come from underserved populations and under-resourced schools. These schools frequently experience [higher staff turnover](#) and students [lack consistent access to experienced teachers](#). As a result, these students often miss out on the [high-impact interventions](#) their peers receive and enter secondary school with unmet literacy needs.



Despite these challenges, two facts remain critical. First, older students can absolutely learn to read when schools provide instruction aligned with the science of reading. Second, most middle and high school teachers have not received training in how to support reading development, especially in foundational skills, as part of their certification. This is particularly true in New York, where the state allows significant flexibility in reading instruction requirements for secondary teacher preparation programs. As a result, educator prep programs across the state vary widely in how (or if) they incorporate science of reading principles and evidence-based adolescent literacy practices.

How Should Schools Support Adolescent Students' Reading Skills?

Addressing adolescent literacy demands a comprehensive approach. Educators must analyze assessment data to pinpoint where reading comprehension breaks down, implement targeted interventions aligned with the science of reading, and support both the social-emotional needs of students and the well-being of the adults who serve them.

Educators working with adolescent learners are already making efforts to tackle this challenge. A 2023 [survey](#) by the RAND Corporation found that 25% to 33% of secondary ELA teachers reported frequently engaging students in foundational reading activities. Teachers in schools serving majority students of color or large populations of Multilingual Learners (MLL) were even more likely to report using these practices regularly.

A [2024 RAND survey of teachers](#) in grades 3–8 further underscores the urgent need to support upper elementary and middle school educators. According to the survey:

- 44% of students consistently struggle to read the written content in their instructional materials.
- 40% of teachers hold misconceptions about how students develop word-reading skills.
- Nearly half of the teachers rely on personal classroom experience, rather than formal training, as their main source of knowledge about reading instruction.
- Almost 75% of teachers in grades 3–8 say they need better tools and resources to identify and support students with reading difficulties.

These findings make one thing clear: educators want to help struggling adolescent readers, but they need stronger training, better materials, and targeted support to do so effectively.



What Would it Take to Support These Students Effectively? Several Essential Elements Must be Considered.



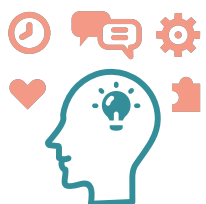
Train teachers in adolescent literacy strategies: The RAND surveys underscores the urgent need for sustained, coordinated professional development to equip secondary ELA teachers with strategies to support foundational reading skills in adolescents. Teaching older students presents unique challenges, as they often enter classrooms with wider skill gaps. To respond effectively, secondary teachers must receive training not only in literacy instruction but also in data literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy. Findings from the [Project for Adolescent Literacy](#) highlight a disconnect between teacher confidence and actual practice. Many educators believe they can support struggling readers, but few use consistent, data-informed approaches or have access to cohesive materials. Instead, they often rely on fragmented resources that fall short of meeting the diverse needs of older struggling readers.



Teach foundational literacy skills in older students who need it: In states like New York, where early literacy instruction has not aligned with the science of reading, many older students continue to struggle with foundational skills like decoding. Few receive explicit instruction in these areas after third grade. A [2019 study](#) by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) identified a critical “decoding threshold” that strongly predicts reading comprehension. Students who cannot decode accurately and fluently struggle to access grade-level texts, which become increasingly complex in vocabulary and structure. Despite this evidence, most reading instruction and assessments for older students focus solely on comprehension and overlook foundational skill gaps. Without diagnostic tools and explicit instruction, many struggling readers remain invisible, and comprehension-focused strategies prove ineffective when students cannot decode the text. Addressing decoding in adolescence is essential for improving overall literacy outcomes.



Use diagnostic assessments for hidden gaps: New tools, such as [ROAR](#) and [Capti Assess](#), now allow educators to measure decoding in adolescents. Programs like [Reading Reimagined](#) are also developing new assessments and instructional resources tailored to older students’ needs. Educators must also receive support in data literacy to interpret results and provide targeted instruction that address identified gaps.



Address social-emotional needs: Reading difficulties in adolescence take a significant emotional toll. When students consistently struggle with reading, their self-esteem and motivation often decline. This creates a negative cycle: students avoid reading, fall further behind, and lose confidence in their academic abilities. To break this cycle, schools must implement policies and practices that address both the academic and emotional needs of adolescent readers. Building confidence, fostering engagement, and creating supportive environments are just as essential as closing skill gaps.

Promising Practices

Despite these challenges, schools, nonprofits, and community organizations across New York and the nation are actively working to close adolescent literacy gaps and many are seeing promising results. By grounding their efforts in evidence-based practices and using multifaceted strategies, these initiatives are beginning to make measurable progress.

The following examples highlight promising practices within broader adolescent literacy efforts. The examples range from district interventions, to interventions across networks of schools, to out of school tutoring interventions, to a school level view of adolescent literacy efforts. As such, these examples demonstrate a variety of actionable, replicable approaches to building sustainable, long-term solutions for adolescent literacy.

New York City Public Schools

Practice: Empowering educators through data literacy

In the nation's largest school district, leaders have spent over a decade supporting secondary readers, beginning with the launch of the [Middle School Quality Initiative](#) in 2011. More recently, the district expanded its efforts through [NYC Reads](#), which introduced the science of reading to all elementary schools and is now bringing that approach to middle schools.

To scale adolescent literacy support, New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) started building district-level capacity by creating district literacy hubs focused on secondary students. These hubs now operate in 11 districts, six community school districts and five high school districts, across all five boroughs.

As the hubs trained educators and implemented evidence-based strategies to support struggling readers, district leaders identified a critical challenge: many schools lacked the ability to use assessment data effectively. Although some schools administered screeners, completion rates stayed low in community districts and inconsistent in high school districts. Even when schools collected data, they often failed to analyze it, plan interventions, or follow-up on diagnostic assessments.

In response, NYCPS shifted its focus. District leaders prioritized building data literacy so educators could identify where reading comprehension breaks down and take informed, targeted action to support students.



New Visions for Public Schools

Practice: Building a school-wide culture committed to improving literacy

[New Visions for Public Schools](#), a New York City-based education nonprofit, supports schools by providing curriculum, coaching, professional learning for high-quality instruction, and data tools for student planning and school management. Between 2017 and 2023, [New Visions Charter High Schools](#) led reading intervention efforts, increasing the percentage of students meeting expected reading growth by 25 percentage points. Their approach involves screening students on foundational literacy, using that and other data to inform decision-making, targeted and research-based reading interventions for students who need it, and cross-content literacy strategies for teachers.

In the 2024–25 school year, New Visions expanded this work to 13 middle and high schools across New York City, launching a pilot to integrate research-based literacy intervention programs at the secondary level. Conversations with pilot leaders revealed key themes around effective literacy interventions, for both students and educators.

New Visions centers its approach on the belief that literacy is a shared responsibility, not just the job of ELA teachers. Principals and district staff play a vital role in creating school-wide culture committed to improving literacy, while also building the knowledge and skills of teachers and school leaders on effective reading interventions. To meet all students' literacy needs, the schools have to make systemic changes across multiple areas, including staffing, professional development, data practices, mindsets, and policy.

To support each school, New Visions guides teams in developing a literacy roadmap and implements a tiered coaching model. This approach helps schools build sustainable systems, strengthen staff capacity and make steady progress toward effective, school-wide literacy instruction.



Geneva Middle School

Practice: Prioritizing time and space for targeted student support and interventions

[Geneva Middle School](#), located in the Finger Lakes region, serves a diverse student population where 34 languages are spoken and students come from many different racial backgrounds. When a new superintendent introduced a WIN (What I Need) period, school leaders now had an opportunity to address troubling data, many graduating 8th graders were reading below a 3rd-grade level, with some struggling to decode basic words. This sparked a schoolwide initiative to close literacy gaps.

The school trained all teachers, regardless of subject area—from ELA to Math to Physical Education—to lead small targeted groups of students during the WIN period. Teachers use 52 different data-informed strategies to group students based on specific literacy needs. The school delivers daily reading interventions to students more than three grade levels behind, including phonics groups of no more than four students. During WIN time, students reading at or near grade level receive help with writing, and newly arrived Multilingual Learners receive targeted support.

To support this work, the school offers professional learning for staff during the summer and holds monthly planning sessions throughout the year. These sessions focus on data literacy, coaching, and reviewing student work.

Early results show promising gains: overall proficiency on the New York State ELA exam for grades 6–8 rose by 7%, with even greater increases among Latinx, Black, and students from low-income backgrounds. Although the school faces challenges such as limited space for differentiated instruction, the consistency of the WIN period and the schoolwide focus on literacy have transformed the culture and shifted mindsets toward stronger student outcomes.



Read Alliance

Practice: Students supporting students in dual-impact model

[Read Alliance](#), a New York City-based high-dosage early literacy and youth development program, takes a unique approach to addressing adolescent literacy. Now in its 25th year, the organization operates on a dual-impact model: it trains teenagers to tutor K–2 students after school, helping younger children reach grade-level reading by 3rd grade while equipping teen tutors with job readiness, leadership skills, and post-secondary preparation.

While the program consistently produces promising results for early readers, a [2023 evaluation](#) conducted by NYU also revealed significant gains for the teen tutors. On average, the teens advanced a full year in foundational reading skills as a result of their tutoring work.

These findings highlight the powerful impact of involving older students in the solution. By teaching younger peers phonemic decoding, the teen tutors strengthened their own literacy skills, built confidence, and earned a paycheck in a meaningful, safe job, all before graduating high school.



How Should State Leaders Address This Issue?

Addressing the reading needs of adolescent learners has become a growing policy priority at the state level. This shift gives New York a chance to lead in supporting older students, especially as the state currently lags behind the nation in early literacy. To seize this opportunity, state leaders must build on last year's Back to Basics law by creating and investing in a comprehensive, multi-year PK-12 literacy agenda that offers differentiated support to all New York students.

EdTrust-New York and our partners in the New York Campaign for Early Literacy are eager to collaborate with state leaders to ensure this agenda includes older students and secondary educators. We aim to equip them with evidence-based resources and support, including:

→ Providing professional learning opportunities for secondary educators

- **Microcredentials in the science of reading:** [SUNY](#), [CUNY](#), [NYSUT](#), [The Reading Institute](#), and other New York organizations have developed microcredentials that secondary educators can earn to learn about the science of reading and how to support adolescent learners.
- **Training in foundational skill development:** Most secondary educators have not been trained to teach reading, particularly in foundational skills, and many will require targeted support to gain these skills.
- **Additional training in data literacy and support for the social-emotional needs** of adolescent students struggling with reading.
- **Hiring of secondary literacy coaches** with expertise in the science of reading to provide training for educators.

→ Expanding the use of diagnostic assessments and instructional tools

- Providing funding and support to purchase and use of **evidence-based screeners and instructional tools designed to identify reading challenges for older students**, including foundational skills such as decoding.
- **Increasing efforts to screen for and address dyslexia and other learning disabilities** in older students that may have gone undetected.
- **Providing technical assistance** for NYSED, BOCES, and other experts to increase support to districts in identifying and utilizing assessment and instructional tools aligned to the science of reading.

→ Aligning educator preparation program requirements for secondary educators with the science of reading and best practices in adolescent literacy

- Ensure the [Literacy Certificate program](#) and Literacy Content Specialty Test for grades 5-12 is aligned with the science of reading and evidence-based practices in adolescent literacy, including foundational skill development.
- Use [The Path Forward](#) educator preparation program recommendations to integrate the needs of adolescent learners in all future reform efforts, including review of educator preparation programs.

→ Supporting school community partnerships and tutoring for adolescent students

- Support partnerships such as Read Alliance’s partnership with NYCPS to support the reading skills of elementary and high school students, inside and outside the school day and year.
- Invest in proven, evidence-based high-impact tutoring models designed to address the reading needs of older students.

→ Increasing state capacity to support adolescent literacy

- Provide increased support to NYSED, BOCES, and other organizations with expertise in adolescent literacy to support districts in addressing adolescent literacy needs.
- Integrate adolescent literacy metrics into the state’s Graduation Measures Initiative to ensure all students graduate with the reading skills necessary for future success.

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Conclusion

This report marks the first step in raising awareness and urgency about the adolescent literacy crisis in New York. We look forward to working with experts and stakeholders across the state and nation to refine and strengthen these findings and recommendations.

Although many of our recommendations build on strategies from the early literacy field, improving adolescent literacy requires more than simply shifting focus to different grade bands or updating educator preparation programs. State and local leaders must tap into the knowledge of those closest to the issue—researchers, advocates, labor leaders, district and state education staff, educator preparation providers, school and district leaders, teachers, professional learning organizations, interventionists, parents and caregivers, and most importantly, students themselves.

EdTrust-New York and the New York Campaign for Early Literacy are ready to help lead this work. We will bring together leaders across the state to design inclusive, equitable and sustainable policies that meet the urgent needs of older students. If we can act boldly to bring the science of reading-aligned instruction to our youngest learners, we must show the same commitment to the adolescents our system has failed.

We are committed to meeting this challenge with inclusion, imagination, integrity, and passion.



Help advance literacy instruction aligned to the science of reading for all students. Explore our work on literacy at EdTrustNY.org/Literacy and learn about how you can get involved with the New York Campaign for Early Literacy at EdTrustNY.org/NYEarlyLiteracyCampaign

Additional Resources on Adolescent Literacy

While early literacy efforts rightly focus on implementing the science of reading in the elementary grades, organizations across the country are also developing professional learning and research-based strategies for educators of older students. To explore this critical issue further, we encourage readers to consult the following resources:

- [Student Achievement Partners](#) offers a [self-paced course](#) focused on improving literacy outcomes for older students reading below grade level.
- [The Reading League](#) has a [Primary Considerations for Adolescent Literacy](#) page that has a lot of rich resources to address the issue.
- [The project for Adolescent Literacy](#) seeks to identify what works (materials, curricula, strategies, and supportive policies) for older readers struggling to meet grade-level literacy demands and begin to tell the stories of educators and students who have seen success.
- [ANET](#) recently embarked on a [pilot program](#) featuring the ROAR assessment, a comprehensive online assessment developed by Stanford and designed to evaluate foundational skills for students in grades K-12.
- [Reading Reimagined](#) conducts research projects to teach reading and literacy more effectively.
- [All About Adolescent Literacy](#) is a national multimedia project offering information and resources to the parents and educators of struggling adolescent readers and writers.
- The National Association of Secondary School Principals released [Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals](#) to guide school leaders to support effective and coherent adolescent literacy efforts in their school buildings.
- [Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9](#), An IES practice guide from 2022, provided these four recommendations:
- Marshall Street's report [Turning the Page to Secondary Literacy](#) names "four best practices that participating schools used to plan, implement, and monitor the effectiveness of secondary reading interventions, as well as tools and templates to bring the practices to life."