

Governor's Pocket Guide to Early Literacy

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Why Focus on Early Literacy?



Starting in kindergarten is too late.

Language and literacy development begin at birth, and gaps in literacy skills appear in children well before they begin kindergarten. As a result, state efforts to improve reading proficiency that start at kindergarten will languish because many children are already behind.

Effective early care and education programs as well as family literacy strategies for infants, toddlers and preschoolers can help close the gap.

Too many children are not proficient in reading by the end of third grade.

According to the 2019 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), only 35% of America's fourth graders are proficient readers, which means that 65% of our nation's fourth graders **are not**. In fact, 31% of children demonstrate only basic reading skills, and 34% are below even the basic reading level. The statistics are worse for specific subgroups. Seventy-eight percent of low-income children —82% of all African American, 77% of all Hispanic and 81% of all Native American children — and more than 90% of dual-language learners score below proficiency on NAEP tests.

Research shows that students who are reading at grade level in third grade are more likely to graduate from high school on time.

Policy levers that governors can pull now.

Early literacy is critical within a state's coordinated, seamless early childhood system. Governors can promote reading proficiency by the end of third grade by creating high-quality early childhood experiences for children.

In establishing a policy agenda focused on early literacy, governors should consider using the authorities and resources outlined in the sections that follow.

65%

U.S. fourth-graders who are not proficient readers

78%

Low-income children in the U.S. who score below proficiency on NAEP tests

90%

Dual-language learners in the U.S. who score below proficiency on NAEP tests

82%

African-American children in the U.S. who score below proficiency on NAEP tests

77%

Hispanic children in the U.S. who score below proficiency on NAEP tests

81%

Native American children in the U.S. who score below proficiency on NAEP tests

EXECUTIVE AUTHORITY

As the chief executive of state government, governors are uniquely positioned to create a collaborative governance structure that promotes early literacy. Governors can issue an executive order to state agencies under their purview (see example from Mississippi) or create a state-level committee and convene key stakeholders to cultivate cross-agency leadership. These key stakeholders should include the following individuals or groups:

- Members of the higher education community who can influence and improve professional development systems, and those who oversee the early childhood and early elementary — pre-kindergarten through grade 3 — credentialing processes.
- Members of the state and local business community who are concerned about educating and training their future workforce.
- Early Care and Education (ECE) providers and administrators, who are building the foundation for school success.
- Other sectors, such as health providers, that can help unpack and address the key barriers to getting children ready for school.
- State early childhood and kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) system administrators, who must work to create a seamless system of aligned curricula and standards across the two systems.

Governors have the authority to direct state agencies — the state education agency, the office of early learning and other agencies — to include early literacy goals and initiatives in their strategic planning processes and work together to support early literacy through a high-quality state system of early care and education.



STATE EXAMPLES

ALABAMA | Gov. Kay Ivey introduced the [Strong Start, Strong Finish](#) initiative, an integrated approach to early learning that cultivates literacy through a Pre-k through grade 3 leadership academy and ensures that Alabama third graders are proficient readers by 2022.

ARKANSAS | Gov. Asa Hutchinson is leading the [RISE initiative](#) (Reading Initiative for Student Excellence), which is changing the way reading is taught through the science of reading and investing in teacher training through RISE Academies.

MISSISSIPPI | Gov. Phil Bryant signed an [executive order](#) creating a task force to improve early literacy in Mississippi public schools, with an emphasis on providing coaches and summer programs to raise literacy levels and tracking reading proficiency levels by district.

OHIO | Gov. Mike DeWine requested \$5 million in state funding to support the [Ohio Governor's Imagination Library initiative](#), which will provide a book to children every month for the first five years of life to support their literacy development.

PUBLIC AWARENESS + AGENDA SETTING



As the state's most powerful and compelling voice, governors can use their position to elevate and champion early literacy across the state. For example, governors can communicate with and influence other state policymakers on key decisions that affect early literacy. They can also help raise public awareness of early literacy rates by visiting high-quality early childhood programs that are using innovative and effective approaches to language and literacy development. Governors can also increase media exposure or help make the connection between grade-level reading and other sectors. Specifically, governors can explore the following strategies:

- Use State of the State addresses or large-scale meetings to focus on early literacy and aligning ECE systems that will garner media attention.
- Call for expanding high-quality early learning opportunities, including Pre-k and full-day kindergarten.
- Use their bully pulpit to convey the message that missing just two days of school every month can adversely affect a child's chances of reading at grade level by the end of third grade, passing middle school classes, graduating from high school and continuing to college.
- Connect with legislators to develop legislative language that supports sound, comprehensive policies related to school readiness.

STATE EXAMPLES

ARIZONA | The [Read On Literacy Summit](#), with leadership from Read On Arizona, focuses on the importance of early literacy. Gov. Doug Ducey has also spearheaded public-private partnerships such as the [K-3 Quality Initiative](#) to increase reading proficiency by reducing chronic absence and supporting full-day kindergarten and workforce development.

KENTUCKY | [Gov. Matt Bevin](#) recently led a call to action on early literacy and, with the first lady, produced a children's book for families in Kentucky. Gov. Bevin is also focusing on teacher preparation programs and training in literacy to create a pipeline of teachers who are trained in the science of teaching reading.

RHODE ISLAND | Gov. Gina Raimondo released a cross-departmental [Third Grade Reading Action Plan](#) and designated third grade reading proficiency as her number one goal.

POLICYMAKING

Systems alignment is a core strategy for improving early literacy outcomes and should be central to a governor's ECE policy agenda. As their state's chief policymaker, governors can connect with legislators and introduce legislation that supports early literacy initiatives and school readiness and that is responsive to the needs of educators, support staff and families with young children. Governors are well positioned to set forth a policy agenda and develop a seamless system of services and support for children from birth to age 8 and their families. Systems alignment policies can include the following strategies:

- Increase the quality of early care and education programs by making investments in professional development, coaching, training and technical assistance in child care, Pre-k and kindergarten.
- Support the increase in program quality standards across all early child care and education settings.
- Adopt comprehensive family engagement strategies focused on the transition between early learning programs and kindergarten, including the development of transition plans and communication with families about early literacy activities at home.
- Increase early identification of developmental delays and increase access to early intervention services.
- Address early childhood mental health needs.
- Reduce rates of early childhood suspension and expulsion.
- Reduce rates of chronic absenteeism.
- Expand summer learning opportunities.
- Expand access to home visiting programs.
- Expand small-group literacy instruction.
- Focus on increasing school readiness, emphasizing social-emotional learning and connecting health and learning.



STATE EXAMPLES

GEORGIA | Gov. Brian Kemp supported the development of a [comprehensive dyslexia bill](#), recently signed into law, and the creation of a language and literacy endorsement to help early learning programs provide language-rich environments for Georgia's youngest learners.

MINNESOTA | Gov. Tim Walz signed a law that focuses on identifying reading difficulties among K-2 students and directs school districts to adopt developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive assessments for that purpose.

NORTH CAROLINA | Gov. Roy Cooper's [Early Childhood Action Plan](#) sets a vision, comprehensive goals and targets for measurably improving outcomes for young children and uses a data dashboard for tracking progress. This plan promotes action on a range of strategies that support early literacy.

BUDGETING

As a key player in the state budget process, governors can reinforce policy priorities through state budget proposals. By allocating resources to early literacy initiatives, governors can demonstrate to the state legislature, the advocacy community and the general public that spending on early literacy is a priority. Governors can increase investments in high-quality early care and education and address financing strategies that affect costs and eligibility by using the following strategies:

- Expand the number of Pre-k classroom slots for 3- and 4-year-olds or offer universal preschool.
- Change eligibility criteria to enable more families with slightly higher incomes to access child care subsidies, raise provider rates and extend the number of months for which families are eligible for assistance.
- Set family income eligibility limits for subsidized child care at up to 85% of the state median income (or 200% of the federal poverty level) and adjust the limit annually to account for inflation.
- Cap family copayments for child care subsidies at 10% of family income.
- Set provider reimbursement rates at the 75th percentile of current market rates so that families have adequate choice of providers in their communities.
- Use chronic absence data to encourage greater investment in health, transportation, after-school programs, early care and education, and other resources to help improve attendance.
- Improve access to health care services through Medicaid expansion, developmental screenings and referrals or increased access to maternal and child health home visiting services.
- Invest in early childhood professionals through educator scholarships and additional professional development and training options.
- Improve child welfare outcomes by enhancing in-home preventive services and reducing the number of out-of-home child placements.



STATE EXAMPLES

IDAHO | Helping at-risk students acquire reading skills by third grade has been a [legislative priority](#) for Gov. Brad Little, and he proposed [doubling funding](#) for a program that provides staffing for additional reading instruction.

MICHIGAN | Gov. Gretchen Whitmer proposed a funding increase of \$24.5 million to support literacy coaches in Michigan public schools. These coaches will help support school districts in complying with the state's [Read by Grade Three](#) law, which passed in 2016 under the previous administration. The law takes effect in the 2019-20 school year, focusing on early literacy services. The budget that the governor signed ultimately increased funding for literacy coaches by \$14 million.

NEVADA | Gov. Steve Sisolak [requested \\$63 million in funding for Read By Grade Three early reading support](#) (up from the current \$41 million) to identify struggling readers and provide intervention services.

OREGON | Gov. Kate Brown championed the [Student Success Act](#), which includes a \$400 million investment to strengthen ECE programs and provides new funding to schools for strategies to improve 3rd grade reading proficiency. The law expands supports for infants and toddlers, access to full-day Pre-k, early intervention services, professional development and culturally specific early childhood programs.

5 Actions Policymakers Can Take to Promote Reading Proficiency by the end of the Third Grade

In addition to the policy levers outlined above, governors can support actions by key policymakers and stakeholders that promote reading proficiency by the end of third grade. Initially identified in the 2013 publication, [“A Governor’s Guide to Early Literacy That Supports Reading by Third Grade.”](#) governors and policymakers can use these five action steps and their substeps as a checklist to identify what governors can champion to strengthen language and literacy development in their state and set children on a trajectory to grade-level reading and overall success in school and beyond.



ACTION 1 Adopt comprehensive language and literacy standards and curricula for early care and education programs and early elementary education:

- Ensure that birth to grade 3 learning standards reflect the three areas of early language and literacy skills and knowledge: (1) language and communication, (2) the mechanics of reading and (3) content knowledge.
- Align early childhood and early elementary curricula and instruction to the birth to grade 3 learning standards.

ACTION 2 Increase the number of young children who have high-quality early learning experiences:

- Expand access to high-quality child care.
- Expand access to high-quality Pre-k programs.
- Expand access to high-quality full-day kindergarten.

ACTION 3 Engage and support families as partners in early language and literacy development:

- Invest in programs that increase families’ capacity to build their children’s language and literacy skills (e.g., home visiting, public-private partnerships to promote parent-child book reading and build home libraries, early literacy campaigns focused on families).
- Incorporate family engagement in existing ECE and K-3 policies, practices and intervention planning.

ACTION 4 Equip professionals who provide child care and education with the skills and knowledge they need to support early language and literacy development:

- Ensure that state professional standards for teachers of children birth to grade 3 and school leaders address the three key areas of early language and literacy skills and knowledge: (1) language and communication, (2) the mechanics of reading and (3) content knowledge.
- Increase the rigor of teacher certification and program accreditation policies and align them to the professional standards for teachers of children from birth to grade 3.
- Raise the bar on qualifications for early childhood professionals.
- Build elementary school principals' capacity to support language and literacy instruction.
- Promote strategic use of investments in evidence-based professional development strategies.
- Implement strategies to improve programs for English language learners (added since the 2013 version of this guide).

ACTION 5 Develop mechanisms to promote continuous improvement and accountability:

- Strengthen Quality Rating and Improvement Systems criteria to promote research-based language and literacy instruction in ECE programs. Develop comprehensive birth to grade 3 assessment systems to appropriately measure children's progress and success, inform instruction and target interventions as early in children's lives as possible.
- Use assessment data appropriately to inform research-based interventions for struggling readers.
- Develop coordinated ECE and K-12 data systems to support quality improvement (e.g., link teacher and program data to child outcome data, link child outcome data across ECE programs and link ECE data to the K-12 longitudinal data system).
- Build the capacity of state agencies to support birth to grade 3 quality improvement efforts at the program, school and district levels (e.g., invest in a state-level support system for districts, research and promote best practices across the state and create incentives to spur local innovations).





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