



Getting Down to **FACTS**

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English Language Arts and Literacy in California: Progress, Capacity, and Implementation

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Introduction

Reading shapes both educational trajectories and everyday life, influencing outcomes such as high school success, college completion, income, and the ability to navigate daily tasks. California has lagged behind the national average in reading for more than two decades. As California enters a new gubernatorial administration, this is a useful moment to assess progress over that period and consider what may be needed for further improvement.

This brief draws on Getting Down to Facts III technical reports to describe California's recent trends in performance in English Language Arts, the promise of new legislation, and the lessons that can be learned from past initiatives. These studies provide evidence that California has meaningfully improved its reading performance, while also highlighting persistent weaknesses in instructional materials adoption, county-level support, and the preparation of teachers, paraeducators, and coaches to deliver high-quality literacy instruction.

Key Findings

1

California has meaningfully improved its reading performance, narrowing the gap between it and the rest of the nation.

Over the past two decades, California has made meaningful progress in reading achievement relative to the national average. The state has also made these gains without widening income-based gaps across districts, though those gaps remain larger in California than in many other states. Students who began kindergarten learning English have improved as well, though substantial disparities remain.

2

California schools and policymakers have made reading a sustained priority over the past two decades.

School leaders consistently identify English Language Arts as a top priority, and state policymakers have enacted a series of reforms aimed at improving literacy instruction. These include changes to teacher preparation and credentialing, early assessment and intervention efforts, and targeted grant programs intended to support literacy improvement in low-performing and high-need schools.

3

Current processes for instructional materials adoption do not provide districts and teachers with clear enough support.

Recent experience suggests that state instructional materials guidance has often been delayed, overly broad, or incomplete. At the same time, many teachers do not view adopted materials as adequate for the students they serve and frequently supplement them, indicating that the adoption process does not consistently yield materials that teachers find usable or well matched to student needs.

4

County offices have the potential to play an important role in literacy improvement, but their capacity is uneven.

Some county offices have provided high-quality professional development and instructional support that contributed to stronger literacy outcomes. But county offices differ substantially in expertise, staffing, and resources, meaning that districts do not have equal access to specialized literacy support across the state.

5

California's educator workforce is not consistently well prepared to deliver high-quality literacy instruction.

Teachers, paraeducators, and instructional coaches all play important roles in literacy improvement, yet current preparation and training systems do not consistently equip them with the specialized knowledge they need. These gaps are especially consequential in schools serving multilingual learners and other students who may need more targeted instructional support.

The Evidence Behind These Findings

California has meaningfully improved its reading performance, narrowing the gap between it and the rest of the nation

California began the 21st century a full grade level behind the national average in reading performance. By 2019, that gap had closed to only 0.3 grade levels (Reardon). Though the COVID-19 pandemic led to a decline in average scores across the United States, California student scores declined less than the national average. By 2024, the most recent year of available scores, the gap between California and the nation had narrowed to 0.2 grade levels, the smallest it has ever been (Reardon).

Figure 1: National Test Score Trends, 2003-2024, Grades 3-8

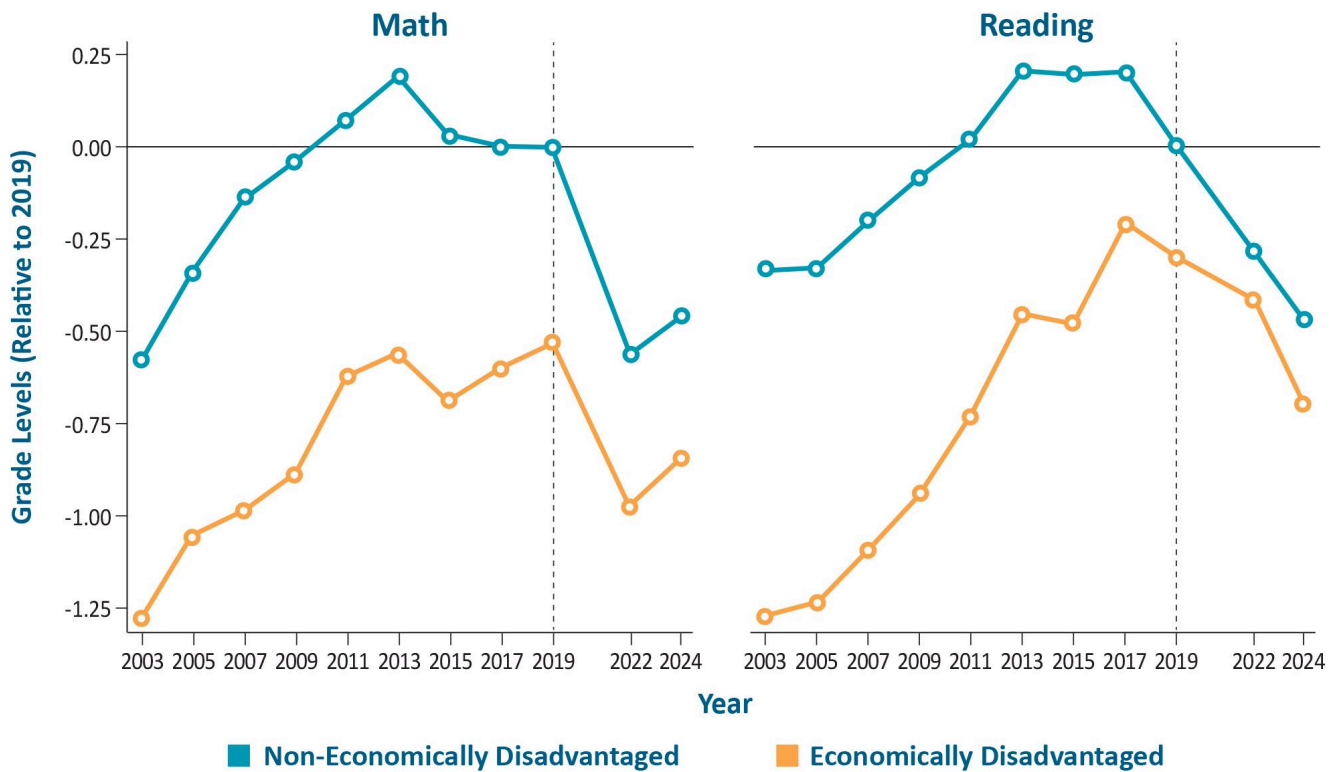


Figure from Reardon, Sean (2026). Recent Academic Achievement Trends in California. Getting Down to Facts III Report

California also achieved these gains without widening the gap between rich and poor districts, though those gaps remain larger than in other states (Reardon). Students who began kindergarten learning English also made meaningful gains in English Language Arts performance. Those students improved their third-grade English Language Arts scores by 0.70 grade levels, such that by 2018 the average third grader who had started kindergarten learning English was performing above a second-grade level (Burns and Price).

California schools and policymakers have made reading a sustained priority over the past two decades

More than half of school leaders ranked English Language Arts as their top priority when interviewed by Gallagher and co-authors. This is partly because school leaders themselves view the issue as important for their students, especially multilingual learners, but also reflects the emphasis that state-level policy has placed on the issue.

As summarized by Novicoff, the state has reformed teacher credentialing and teacher preparation in ways intended to align both with evidence-based reading practices. The state has also instituted a new assessment for young students to identify who is struggling to acquire reading skills and deploy interventions to help. In addition, the state has created two targeted grant programs to fund improvements to literacy in low-performing schools and in high-need schools respectively.

Current processes for instructional materials adoption do not provide districts and teachers with clear enough support

Gallagher and co-authors find that instructional materials guidance in mathematics came almost two years after the approval of the framework, and a third of districts adopted materials without waiting for the state's list. When the state did publish its list, it included 38 options for K–8 math, too many for many district staff to review carefully. As one district leader put it, “Having so many approved textbooks is not guidance.” The list also did not include recommendations for transitional kindergarten, leaving districts without state guidance for that grade level. Although this evidence comes from mathematics rather than ELA, it highlights implementation challenges that are relevant to California's new ELA adoption.

Once materials are adopted, teachers continue to exercise substantial autonomy in supplementing curricula and do so frequently. California teachers generally do not view their adopted curricula favorably: only half say their materials are at the right level for most of their students, and fewer than a quarter rate them as adequate for students with disabilities or multilingual learners.

County offices have the potential to play an important role in literacy improvement, but their capacity is uneven

County offices of education play an important role in both accountability and district support in California. Across two early literacy grants, Novicoff documented how the Sacramento County Office of Education organized high-quality professional development offerings for hundreds of school sites, targeting teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators as agents for change. These programs delivered large learning gains for students, thanks in part to the instructional support provided by that county office.

However, as documented by Trinidad and co-authors, county offices differ substantially in their expertise and resources. In particular, smaller or more rural counties often serve a large geographic area with few staff members and thus cannot provide specialized content expertise; instead, they focus on compliance and fiscal oversight. This variation creates uneven access to support for districts seeking to improve literacy instruction.

California's educator workforce is not consistently well prepared to deliver high-quality literacy instruction

Teachers are credentialed in California to serve large grade bands, as shown by Grossman and Kaul. For example, a single subject credential allows teachers to teach that subject to students of all grades from preschool to adults; a special education credential similarly ranges from preschool through age 22. As a result, many teachers responsible for reading instruction may not have sufficiently specialized preparation in literacy. The PK-3 credential is a step in the right direction, but more work is needed.

These training gaps bear down especially on California's multilingual learners. Santibañez shows that schools serving high proportions of English Learner students have fewer fully credentialed and less experienced teachers, exacerbating these problems. López shows that, while teachers in California are universally licensed to support multilingual learners, the quality of that training varies widely in the absence of a statewide assessment mechanism.

The workforce for literacy improvement goes beyond teachers. Paraeducators often provide literacy support in schools, but survey data summarized by Lemons and co-authors show that paraeducators rated literacy as the area where their professional development was most lacking. This is despite research literature that shows paraeducators can effectively implement early literacy interventions and substantially improve student achievement if given the tools to do so. In particular, the tutoring literature summarized by Loeb and Ziegler suggests paraeducators could be an important source of instructional support.

Training is also insufficient for instructional coaches, a key part of the literacy improvement strategy for the state. As described by Novicoff, there is no license required to be an instructional coach in California. Literacy coaches may obtain the Reading and Literacy Added Authorization or the Reading and Literacy Specialist Credential to strengthen their preparation for literacy coaching, but they are not required to do so. If they wanted to enroll, candidates would find that these programs are costly and only offered by 19 institutions statewide, none further north than Sacramento. Novicoff found that districts in counties without an authorizing entity were almost 20 percentage points less likely to spend their literacy coaching funds, perhaps because they were unable to hire qualified candidates.

Implications for California

The evidence points to three areas where California's recent experience in literacy has direct implications for future policy and implementation.

Instructional materials adoption as a continuing implementation challenge

AB-1454 creates an opportunity for California to strengthen literacy instruction through new instructional materials aligned to research-based practices. At the same time, past experience in mathematics suggests that instructional materials adoption does not automatically produce clear or usable guidance for districts. Delays in state guidance, a large number of approved options, and the absence of transitional kindergarten materials all reduced the usefulness of the prior adoption process. These lessons suggest that the impact of the new ELA adoption will depend not only on which materials are approved, but also on whether districts receive guidance that is specific enough to support local decision-making and implementation.

Past instructional materials adoption in mathematics also produced more approved materials than districts could reasonably review with care. This suggests that the value of the new ELA adoption will depend not only on approval criteria, but also on whether districts receive clearer guidance about tradeoffs across materials or more intensive support around a smaller number of strong options.

County capacity and hub-based support as a source of unevenness and opportunity

The research suggests that literacy improvement depends in part on whether districts can access high-quality technical assistance, and county capacity remains highly uneven. Smaller and more rural counties often lack the staff and expertise needed to provide specialized literacy support. Meanwhile, the literacy hub structure created through the Literacy Coaches and Reading Specialists Grant appears to have helped extend stronger support in some parts of the state but will wind down when the program funds expire in mid-2029. This points to the importance of permanent county and regional support structures in determining whether schools can benefit from high-quality professional learning and implementation assistance.

Educator preparation and training as a continuing constraint on literacy improvement

California's current credentialing and training systems are not yet well aligned with the specialized demands of literacy instruction. Broad grade-span credentials, uneven preparation for multilingual learner instruction, insufficient training for paraeducators, and limited pathways for literacy coaches all reduce the system's capacity to deliver strong instruction consistently. The recent creation of the PK-3 credential illustrates one way in which preparation can be better matched to developmental stage and content, and the broader implication is that literacy improvement will continue to depend on whether training systems become more specific, accessible, and geographically available.

The Reading and Literacy Added Authorization and the Reading and Literacy Specialist Credential create opportunities to prepare instructional leaders in literacy, but current capacity is inadequate to meet

demand. Capacity is also unevenly distributed, leaving the northern part of the state without support. This uneven capacity appears to constrain districts' ability to hire qualified literacy coaches and to use literacy coaching funds effectively.

Paraeducators also represent an important but underprepared part of the literacy workforce. Given both their potential and the gaps in their preparation, the broader implication is that literacy improvement depends not only on teacher training, but also on stronger professional development for paraprofessionals and other staff who provide reading support.

Conclusion

California's experience in English Language Arts and literacy over the past two decades shows that sustained policy attention, combined with growing alignment to evidence-based practice, can yield meaningful improvements in student outcomes. The state has narrowed its gap with national reading performance and seen gains for key student populations, including students who began school learning English. At the same time, persistent gaps across districts, uneven instructional conditions, and variability in implementation highlight that improved averages have not translated into uniformly strong literacy experiences for all students.

The central challenge for California's next phase of literacy improvement is how to strengthen the coherence and capacity of the structures already in place. Progress will depend heavily on the strength of California's instructional materials systems, county and regional support structures, and educator training pipeline.

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