

# POLICY PILLARS

SUPPORTING  
WHAT WORKS

## Literacy: Adopting Research-Based Strategies to Develop Young Readers

Tennessee's strong foundation of research-based strategies — including early literacy standards, interventions, teacher training, and instructional materials — have contributed to significant English language arts (ELA) proficiency gains for young readers.

### Understanding the Policies

Tennessee has a robust ecosystem of policies to support early literacy. As an important first step, the state adopted rigorous academic expectations for students to be proficient readers and writers. To strengthen core instruction and student supports, Tennessee passed two key bills in 2021 to **improve Tennessee's early literacy rates by committing to instruction that focuses on five foundational literacy skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.** This is a research-based approach to ensure students have systematic, explicit instruction to become strong readers. Tennessee has implemented a strong set of foundational policies and strategies to advance early literacy, including:

- **Foundational Literacy Skills Instruction:** Tennessee districts and public charter schools must provide students in grades K-5 with foundational literacy skills instruction as their primary method for teaching ELA, as evidence shows these skills are needed to develop proficient young readers.<sup>1,2</sup>
- **High-Quality Instructional Materials:** Districts and public charter schools must adopt and purchase textbooks and instructional materials designed to align with the five foundational literacy skills. To support adoption and use of these aligned materials, the state invested in networks of districts to support the implementation of these newly purchased materials and to provide coaches for educator training.<sup>3</sup>
- **Teacher Preparation and Training:** To support foundational literacy skills instruction, the state developed standards for training K-5 teachers to effectively teach reading. All K-5 educators have access to training that focuses on the five foundational literacy skills, either through their formal preparation as a teacher candidate or through a free course provided by the state. All K-5 teacher candidates and current K-5 teachers must demonstrate their understanding of the foundational literacy skills approach and the use of newly adopted high-quality instructional materials.<sup>4</sup>
- **Universal Reading Screeners:** All students in grades K-3 are screened three times annually to identify reading deficiencies. The state provides a free option — the Tennessee Universal Reading Screener — and districts can choose from a list of approved universal reading screeners to determine whether any student is struggling with specific reading skills.<sup>5</sup>
- **High-Dosage, Low-Ratio Tutoring:** Across the state, students who are struggling with reading proficiently are provided with tutoring in small groups (teacher-student ratios of 1:3 or 1:4), for at least 30-minute sessions, multiple times per week. This frequent low-ratio tutoring is a key state strategy and one pathway for promotion to fourth grade for students who did not score proficient on their third-grade ELA assessment.<sup>6</sup>

## Why are the Policies Needed?

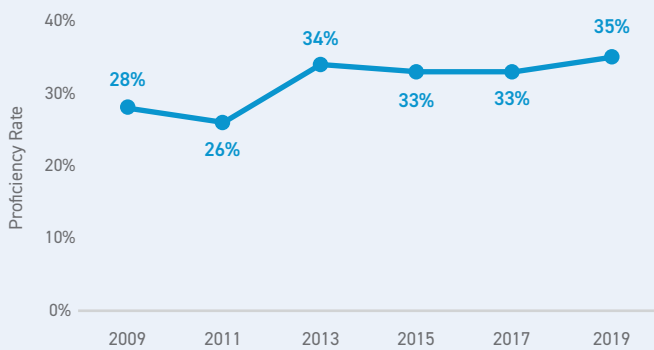
**Tennessee has prioritized early literacy as a key milestone for student achievement, as data show that students who are not proficient in reading by third grade have decreased opportunities for success later in life.** By the time a student completes third grade, they are expected to know how to write legibly and within grammatical convention, and to have sufficient decoding and fluency skills to support comprehension when reading. Students must be prepared to apply these skills toward learning in other subjects. Students with low reading achievement in fourth grade are less likely to complete high school on time and more likely to experience a future of poverty.<sup>7</sup> Further, studies show that only 12% of students who are low achieving on reading in the third grade end up scoring at the state average by high school, leading to

decreased opportunities for success. Critically, economically disadvantaged students, Black students, and male students are also less likely to catch up in their reading achievement over time compared with other students.<sup>8</sup>

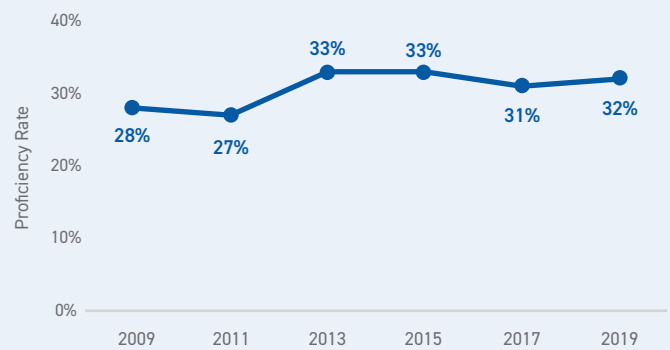
For years, Tennessee's proficiency rates in reading had stalled. From 2009-2013, Tennessee's proficiency on the Nation's Report Card (NAEP) assessment increased from 28% to 34% for fourth-grade students and similarly from 28% to 33% for eighth-grade students, but progress slowed afterward for both grade levels from 2013-2019.<sup>9</sup> A comparative look at ELA proficiency on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) assessment revealed that ELA proficiency rates were declining statewide prior to the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

### Prior to COVID-19, Tennessee Student Progress in Reading Had Stalled

NAEP Fourth-Grade Reading



NAEP Eighth-Grade Reading



#### Fourth- and eighth-grade proficiency on NAEP from 2009-2019

Source: Nation's Report Card, 2024

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 exacerbated Tennessee's declining literacy rates and resulted in significant disruptions to learning, worsening persistent achievement gaps for historically underserved student groups.<sup>11</sup> Results from the 2021 TCAP assessment revealed that every student group in grades 3-8 had lost ground in reading and writing, with overall ELA proficiency rates falling to 28%. Even more concerning, only 15% of Black, Hispanic, and Native American students were proficient in ELA and only about 14% of economically disadvantaged students had reached proficiency.<sup>12</sup>

Persistent low literacy rates prompted Tennessee to take a closer look at the methods used to teach young readers.

A National Reading Panel report evaluating how to teach children to read concluded that explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and methods to improve fluency are together the best approach to reading.<sup>13</sup> Research also shows strong evidence that high-dosage tutoring can result in learning acceleration for students.<sup>14</sup> Another key to implementing strong reading instruction is high-quality instructional materials, and evidence from Tennessee districts has shown that high-quality instructional materials provide a strong foundation for increasing student outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

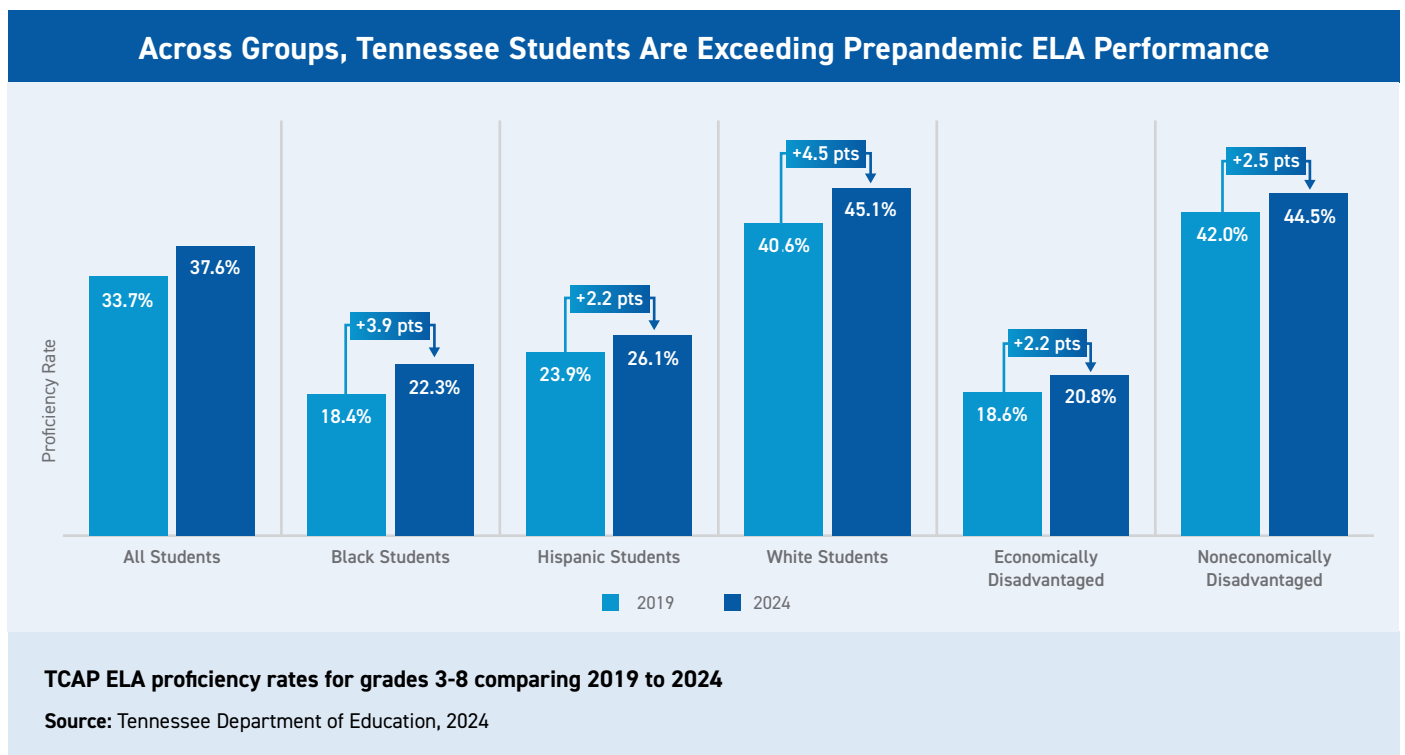
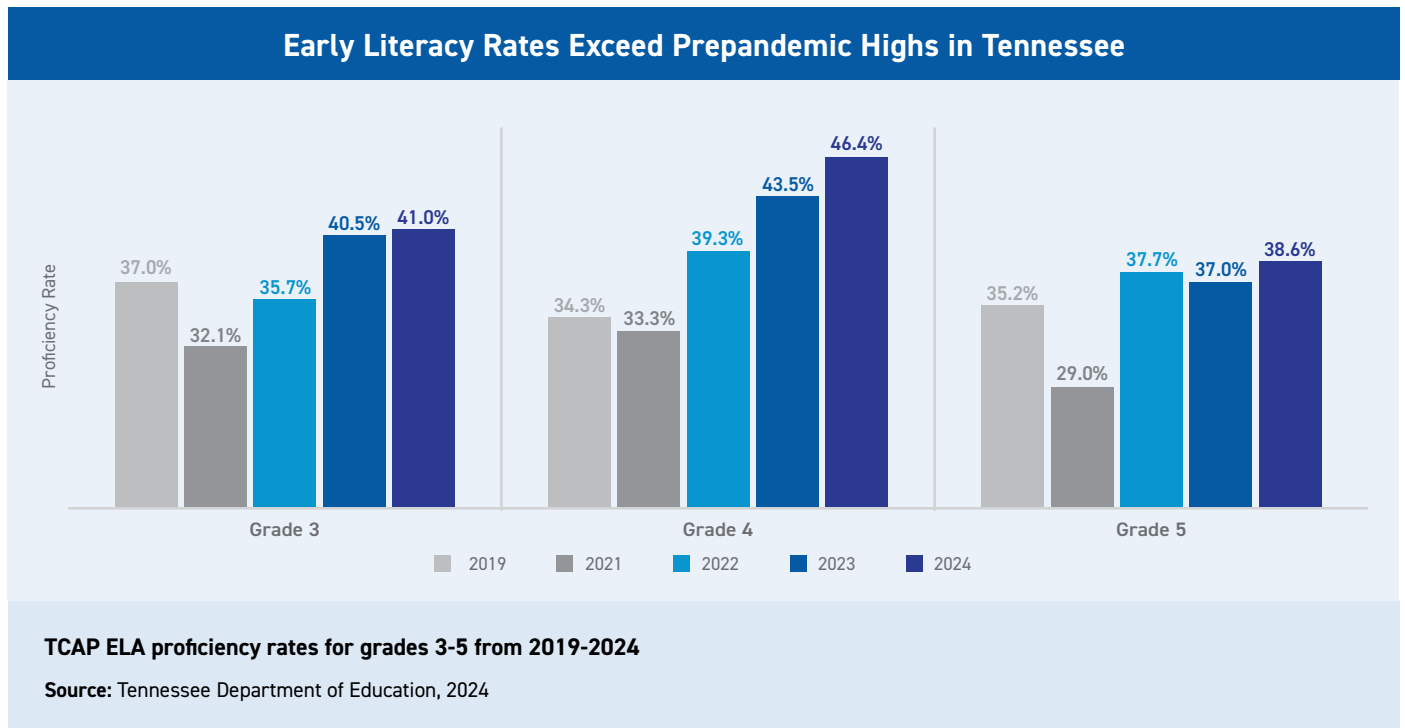
**Strong literacy policies and the implementation of best practices supported by research have been essential to achieving sustained literacy improvements.**

## What is the Impact?

Tennessee has a strong literacy policy foundation, and implementation of these policies has already yielded record-breaking ELA student outcomes.

**Tennessee’s third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students set record highs on the ELA portion of the TCAP in 2024.** Further, students in these grades have made significant gains since the 2021 drop and have even surpassed the previous record

highs from 2019. Gains are apparent across student groups, with percentage point proficiency increases for students of color and economically disadvantaged students from 2019 to 2024. Following the implementation of Tennessee’s landmark literacy policies, we see more third-grade students meeting expectations and fewer third-grade students than ever scoring in the lowest performance category on the ELA portion of the TCAP.



## Looking Forward

Every student deserves access to excellent evidence-based early literacy instruction. Today, Tennessee students receive standards-aligned instruction with high-quality ELA materials from an educator trained in reading instructional methods grounded in foundational literacy skills. Every Tennessee student is screened three times a year, and every Tennessee student has access to free summer learning programs and tutoring. This comprehensive strategy and prioritization of literacy has improved outcomes for Tennessee students.

While clear evidence of success has shown these foundational early literacy policies are working, far too many Tennessee students are not reading on grade level and proficiency gaps remain across student groups. Therefore, continued advancement and evaluation of these foundational policies and supports is critical to ensuring that more of Tennessee's future readers are set up for lifelong success. **Tennessee must continue to do what works best for students and take bold steps to provide our youngest students with the opportunity to build their foundational literacy skills.**<sup>16</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tennessee Public Chapter 3 of 2021.

<sup>2</sup> *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*. National Reading Panel.

<sup>3</sup> *TDOE Opens District Applications for Pre-K-12 Literacy Implementation Networks (2021)*. Tennessee Department of Education.

<sup>4</sup> Tennessee Public Chapter 3 of 2021.

<sup>5</sup> *Universal Screener Policy 3.302*. Tennessee State Board of Education.

<sup>6</sup> *Academic and Instructional Requirements Rule 0520-01-03*. Tennessee State Board of Education.

<sup>7</sup> *Early Warning! Why Reading at the End of Third Grade Matters (2010)*. The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

<sup>8</sup> McKenzie, Sarah; Jordan, Emily; and Reid, Charlene A., "Long-Term Outcomes of Low Achieving Third Grade Readers" (2018).

<sup>9</sup> *Tennessee State Profile*. The Nation's Report Card.

<sup>10</sup> *Data Downloads & Requests, State Assessments*. Tennessee Department of Education.

<sup>11</sup> *Learning Loss in Tennessee*. Tennessee Department of Education.

<sup>12</sup> *Data Downloads & Requests, State Assessments*. Tennessee Department of Education.

<sup>13</sup> *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*. National Reading Panel.

<sup>14</sup> Robinson, Carly; Kraft, Matt; Loeb, Susanna; and Schueler, Beth., "Design Principles for Accelerating Student Learning with High-Impact Tutoring" (2021). EdResearch for Action.

<sup>15</sup> *Expanding Early Literacy Implementation (2021)*. LIFT Education: Leading Innovation for Tennessee.

<sup>16</sup> *Early Literacy Success for All Students: A Coherent Path Forward (2023)*. State Collaborative on Reforming Education.