



Literacy is Life:

Improving Literacy for Black Students

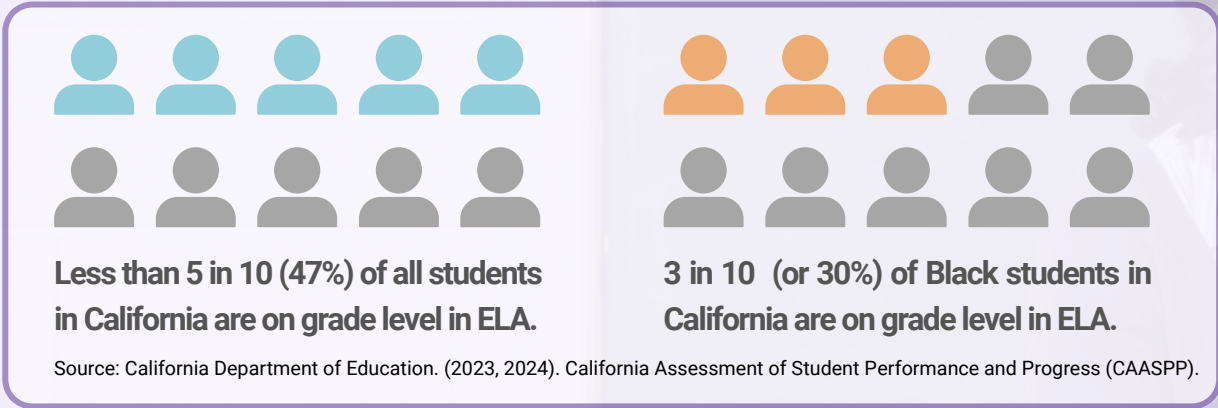


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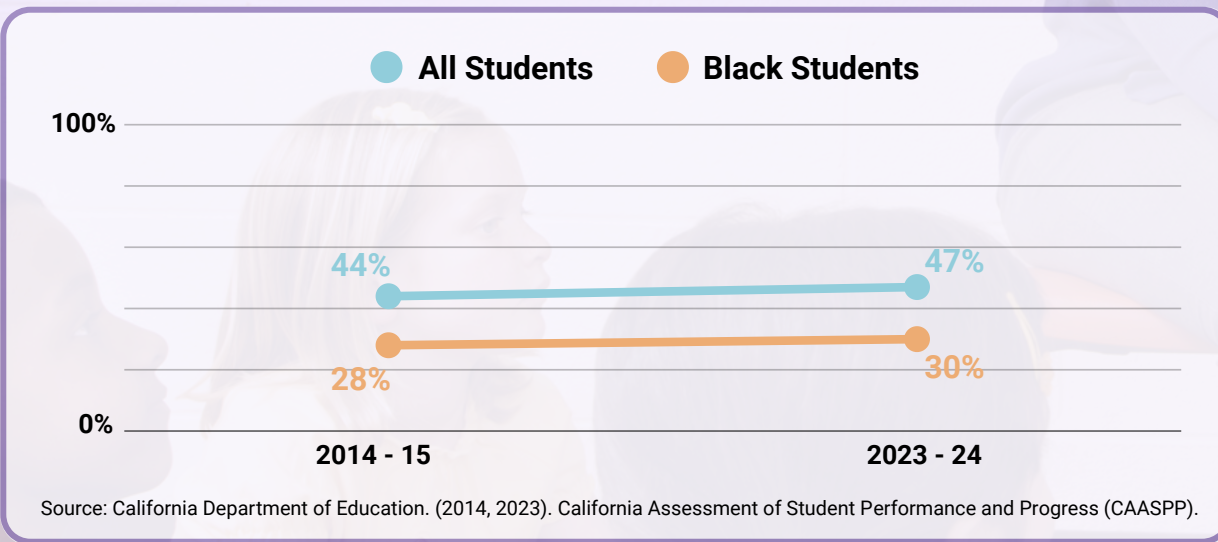


This guide provides information about the current state of literacy for Black students in California. Families can use this information to engage in powerful conversations with school and district leaders about high-quality literacy for Black students.*

Across all racial subgroups, **Black students are the furthest behind in English Language Arts (ELA) in California.** Less than 5 in 10 of all students are on grade level in ELA, and only 3 in 10 Black students are on grade level in ELA.¹



There is an ongoing literacy gap between Black students and all students in California.² Over nearly a ten year period, the number of Black students reading at grade level standards has only increased by two percentage points, from 28% to 30%.³



Addressing the literacy gap requires more than acknowledging it. **Black students need to be at the forefront of high-quality literacy.**

*While the focus of the brief is literacy for Black students, the strategies highlighted throughout are grounded in research and can benefit all students.

Why Literacy Matters

Literacy is the foundation of how we connect and interact with the world.⁴ There is more to literacy than knowing how to read and write. There is no one size fits all approach to teaching literacy.⁵ Some children need more explicit instruction, while others thrive with minimal guidance.⁶ The key is to understand where children are on their journey and adapt teaching to meet students where they are.

In explicit instruction the teacher explains and models skills, provides clear examples, and ensures understanding through frequent checks and feedback.^{7 8}

Literacy impacts a student's chances of graduating high school, their future job opportunities, and their income.⁹ For example, students who graduate high school, but cannot read, struggle with completing paperwork or official documents without help.^{10 11}

Educational disenfranchisement means some communities are unfairly not given basic education, support, and opportunities they deserve. This includes access to good classrooms, qualified teachers, and college and career education opportunities.^{15 16}

Black students have been historically underserved. For generations, the education system has failed the Black community with access to high-quality literacy opportunities.^{12 13} This has led to a cycle of educational disenfranchisement where Black families have not been prioritized for the resources they deserve.¹⁴

The ongoing opportunity gap is a result of systemic inequities. Research across the country shows that Black students:

- Are more likely than any other racial subgroup to be taught by new or first-year teachers¹⁷
- Attend schools with higher numbers of uncertified teachers than any other racial subgroup¹⁸
- Are more than twice as likely as their white peers to attend high-poverty schools¹⁹
- Are more likely to be low-income than any other racial subgroup²⁰
- Are less likely to complete a college degree than any other racial subgroup²¹
- Black teachers are less likely than White and Asian teachers to have substitutes cover their classes when they are absent²²

"To make sure equality is achieved by all, we must invest in early literacy for Black students."

Innovate Parent Leader

These are a few examples of many systemic barriers where Black students get fewer resources and lack of access to experienced teachers.²³ Black students in California remain the furthest behind compared to all racial subgroups.²⁴

What Does High-Quality Literacy Instruction Look Like?

Many people think reading comes naturally, just like talking. That's not true. **Teachers must teach reading as a skill.** To learn this skill we have to learn how to connect sounds to letters and words.²⁵

Systematic instruction: A way of teaching where each step builds on the last, so children learn in a clear and organized order.²⁸

The Science of Reading shows that all students should learn to read through **explicit, direct, and systematic instruction**, using the Six Pillars of Literacy.²⁶ The Science of Reading is a collection of research about how children learn to read most effectively. It is not a program, product, or intervention but a framework to understanding what works.²⁷

Evidence-based literacy strategies are **effective for all children, including Black students.** Teachers can help Black students love reading by using reading materials and lessons that celebrate Black culture, traditions, beliefs, and contributions.^{29 30}

The Six Pillars of Literacy

High-quality literacy curriculum requires the following Six Pillars of Literacy:³¹

Phonemic Awareness: Know the sounds in spoken words. For example, “cat” uses the sounds /c/, /a/, and /t/ and if you change the /c/ in “cat” to /h/, you have “hat”, a different word.

Phonics: Connect letters to sounds. For example, “hop” and “hope” sound different because the silent “e” changes the vowel sound.

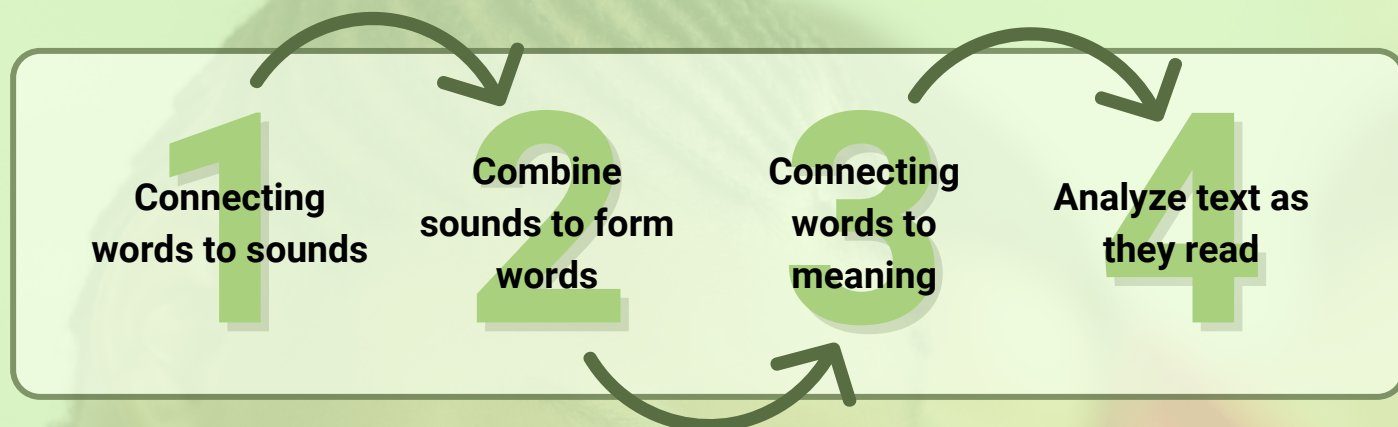
Fluency: Read with the right speed and expression. For example, pausing at commas or stopping at periods.

Vocabulary: Understanding the meaning of words and how to use them.

Comprehension: Understanding what you read. For example, reading a story and explaining what happened.

Oral language: Understanding and using spoken language.

To become proficient readers, children must learn to break words into sounds, combine sounds to form words, connect words to their meaning, and analyze and comprehend text as they read.^{32 33 24} The Six Pillars of Literacy represent the curriculum teachers use to provide high-quality literacy instruction. Below are the steps teachers can take to help students learn to read.



An Example of Success

Evidence-based policies can boost literacy for all students. As of 2025, **California does not have a statewide policy that requires the Science of Reading in school curriculums.**³⁵ Introducing policies focused on the Science of Reading will uplift literacy outcomes for Black students.

Mississippi is an example of success. The state passed the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, a law based in the Science of Reading. It focuses on finding struggling readers early and provides support such as high-quality tutoring and summer literacy camps. The state requires third graders to take a reading test, if students do not pass they might be held back a grade. Teachers also get training in the Science of Reading.³⁶ As a result, Mississippi moved from 49th in rank (out of 50) in fourth-grade reading in 2013 to 21st in 2022 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).³⁷



"As parents, we believed that the foundation of a proper education is fluency in literacy so we made conscious efforts to encourage our kids to start reading very early in their childhood."

Innovate Parent Leader

Stages of Literacy Development: Key Milestones ●

Children learn to read and write through steps, similar to learning to walk.³⁸ This process begins the day children are born.³⁹ This is what we call **literacy development**.⁴⁰ They move from matching sounds with letters to understanding the plot of a story.

Literacy development reading milestones are guidelines and not rules.

Every child's journey is unique. Children move at their own speed, and can spend different amounts of time at each stage. A child's progress is linked to their individual learning differences and language skills.

Here is what literacy development milestones typically looks like:

□ 0 - 5 years old:

Children start recognizing pictures, symbols, signs, and basic words. They **understand that words have meaning**.⁴¹

- Pretends to read books (Example: turning pages and telling stories)
- Sings the alphabet (ABC) song
- Enjoys being read to
- Identifies familiar logos and signs (Example: "fire" truck)

□ 6 - 7 years old:

Children connect letters to sounds and break simple words. They **start writing short words and sentences**.

- Moves from "pretend" reading to reading simple texts aloud
- Understands relationships between letters and sounds
- Writes phonetically (Example: "kat" for "cat" or "frend" for "friend")
- Finger-points to track words while reading

THE TURNING POINT:

By the end of third grade, children transition from learning to read to reading to learn.⁴²

75% of students who struggle with reading in third grade will continue to struggle in high school, and many are unlikely to graduate.⁴³



□ 7 - 9 years old:

Children become more fluent readers and start finding patterns in word structure and spelling. They also **begin to read for meaning** and write more difficult sentences.

- Reads silently without reading out-loud
- Reads longer sentences and simple books on their own
- Corrects their own mistakes when what is read does not make sense
- Writes sentences with correct capitalization and punctuation

□ 9 - 11 years old:

Children read and write more fluently, make fewer writing mistakes, and start using reading and writing as tools to **learn on their own**.

- Reads longer and more difficult materials such as textbooks⁴⁴
- Learns new and more difficult words⁴⁵
- Uses comparisons and words in creative ways (not just their literal meaning). For example, "The water was as cold as ice"⁴⁶
- Looks at two texts and finds differences⁴⁷

□ 11 - 14 years old:

Reading and writing become important tools for learning. **Students become fully fluent readers** and are able to read on their own to learn new information.⁴⁸

- Uses reading to learn new information every day. For example, reading the rules of a board game to learn how to play
- Understands the characters in a story and how they talk and interact to one another⁴⁹
- Form their own opinions from what they read and back them up with details from the text⁵⁰
- Reads different types of texts. For example, poetry, biographies, and fiction books⁵¹

What Does Not Work

The Reading Wars is a debate about the best way to teach students to read.⁵² Especially about the role of phonics in teaching literacy.⁵³ As mentioned earlier, the Science of Reading is a body of research that shows children learn to read most effectively through explicit and systematic instruction in phonics, along with the Pillars of Literacy.

California schools are using outdated methods to teach reading skills to students.⁵⁴ It is clear those are not working. As of 2022, less than 2% of districts in California use curriculums that follow the Science of Reading.⁵⁵

The following teaching strategies lack a strong focus on phonics or do not align with how reading skills actually develop.⁵⁶ These methods are not effective in supporting all students in becoming skilled readers.

Three-Cueing System⁵⁷

- Children guess words instead of learning to sound them out, using context, visuals and structure.
- For example, if a child sees a picture of an animal in a sentence, they might guess the word “horse” is “pony” because it fits the picture and sentence context.
- As of January of 2024, 10 states have banned the three-cueing system from reading instruction.⁵⁸ California is not one of them.

Whole Language Instruction⁵⁹

- Assumes that kids learn to read naturally when they are near books and in places full of reading materials, without explicit instruction.⁶⁰
- It encourages children to guess words from pictures or context. It does not focus on teaching them to decode words with phonics.⁶¹

Balanced Literacy⁶²

- A way of teaching reading that tries to give kids a “little bit of everything,” mixing different strategies. It does not always include phonics or step-by-step instruction.

Guided Reading⁶³

- Children get books with words they have not learned yet, so they rely on pictures and clues.
- Assumes most children do not need systematic phonics and can learn to read by being around books.

What To Ask

Now that we know what to look for, here are questions you can ask to begin engaging in powerful conversations with schools and district leaders about literacy:

Teachers

- What is the curriculum you're using to teach literacy?
- What strategies do you use to teach reading in the classroom?
- What are the barriers that you face in teaching literacy?
- As a parent, how can I best support my child in learning to read?
- How do you support different reading levels within the same class?
- What is your perspective around using phonics?

School Leaders

- How does the school collect data on student literacy?
- How do you track student literacy outcomes?
- Are teachers at this school trained in the Science of Reading? What sort of professional development do they receive?
- What are the barriers the school is facing in supporting student literacy?
- How do you approach targeted reading interventions for Black students?
- What interventions are in place for students who need extra help?

District Leaders

- What are your district's policies around the use of phonics?
- How does the district measure reading success?
- If you had a magic wand, what change would you like to see in student literacy in your district?
- Are there any resources available for parents to support reading at home?
- How does the district address disparities in reading achievement among different student groups?

When district leaders, teachers, families, and community members work together, we can help children build the literacy skills they need to succeed in school and in life.

"Once you learn to read, you will be forever free."
Frederick Douglass



About Innovate Public Schools:

Innovate Public Schools is a nonprofit organization that builds the power and capacity of parents and families to organize, advocate, and demand high-quality schools for their children. We believe the education system was not designed to serve all children, and that the biggest barrier to all children having access to an excellent school is a lack of political will to improve the system. We believe the voices and experiences of parents, families, and students should be elevated and centered in decisions about education. To learn more about how Innovate Public Schools organizes families locally and across the state visit www.innovateschools.org.

About the Black Parent Network:

The Black Parent Network (BPN) is a community of parents at Innovate Public Schools from diverse backgrounds and various school districts who come together to address the unique challenges and experiences faced by Black students in the education system.

Scan here to keep an eye out for our data reports:



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