

THE LITERACY CRISIS IN LOS ANGELES AND BEYOND:

A PROBLEM WE CAN AND MUST
COLLECTIVELY SOLVE

A REPORT FOR LAUSD FAMILIES





**Once you learn to
read, you will be
forever free.**

Frederick Douglass



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INTRODUCTION

Dear LAUSD Families,

We know you care deeply about your child succeeding in school and in life. To achieve this, children must have the ability to read. Reading is one of the most fundamental skills — to succeed in school and life.

What is the challenge?

Across California and Los Angeles, the majority of children are not reading on grade level, according to state assessments. We begin tracking reading ability in third grade, which predicts school success. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, only 4 in 10 third graders are on grade level in reading. This means in a classroom of 30 children, only 12 will be reading on grade level. The students who are most behind are disproportionately Black and Latino, English learners, and students from low-income backgrounds.

Why does this matter?

Students who can read on grade level by third grade, have fewer academic challenges, are more likely to graduate from high school, and will have stronger financial stability over the course of their lives. Reading is vital for success in school and life — and **therefore a fundamental civil right**.

Where do we go from here?

Each and every day you have the power to help your children at home and to be an advocate for your child and for many other children. Some actions are within our immediate control and are focused on how we bring literacy into our homes and daily habits. Other actions focus on advocating at the school and district level to ensure that our students have access to high quality literacy instruction aligned to evidence-based reading approaches that are aligned to what is called the “science of reading.” Together, we can make a difference!

In this report, we offer **a set of recommendations for families to ensure that solving the literacy crisis is a shared effort** inside and outside the classroom. We hope you will join us as we call for the changes and resources necessary to ensure all students are reading on grade level by the end of third grade.

Sincerely,



Yolie Flores, President & CEO
Families In Schools

LOS ANGELES UNIFIED STUDENT DATA 2022-23

Chronic Absenteeism

What is this measuring?

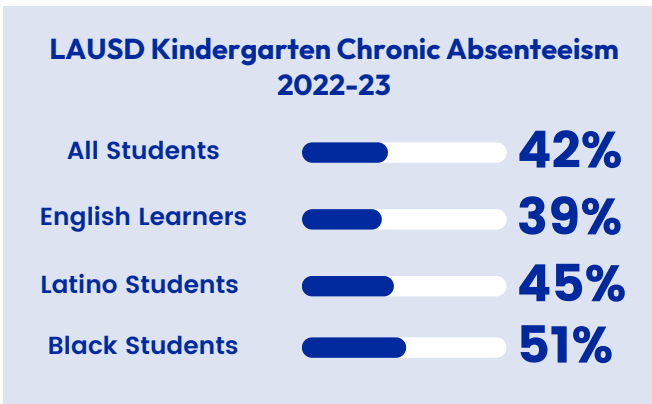
Chronic absence is defined as missing 10% or more days of the school year for any reason.

How does this connect to literacy?

Students that miss school will miss the learning that is happening in the classroom. For children that are in kindergarten, missing too much school will impact their ability to learn to read because this is the grade that lays the foundation for reading.

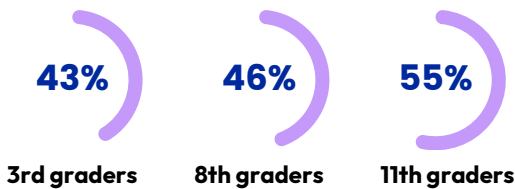
Key Takeaway

Chronic absenteeism in kindergarten at LAUSD is 11.6% higher than the overall rate across the district.



Reading Proficiency Across California

We begin our literacy exploration at the state level. Across the state of California we see that reading proficiency is too low.



This means 234,029 California third graders were below grade level at the end of the 2022-23 school year. This academic gap follows many students throughout their educational journey.

Reading Proficiency in LAUSD

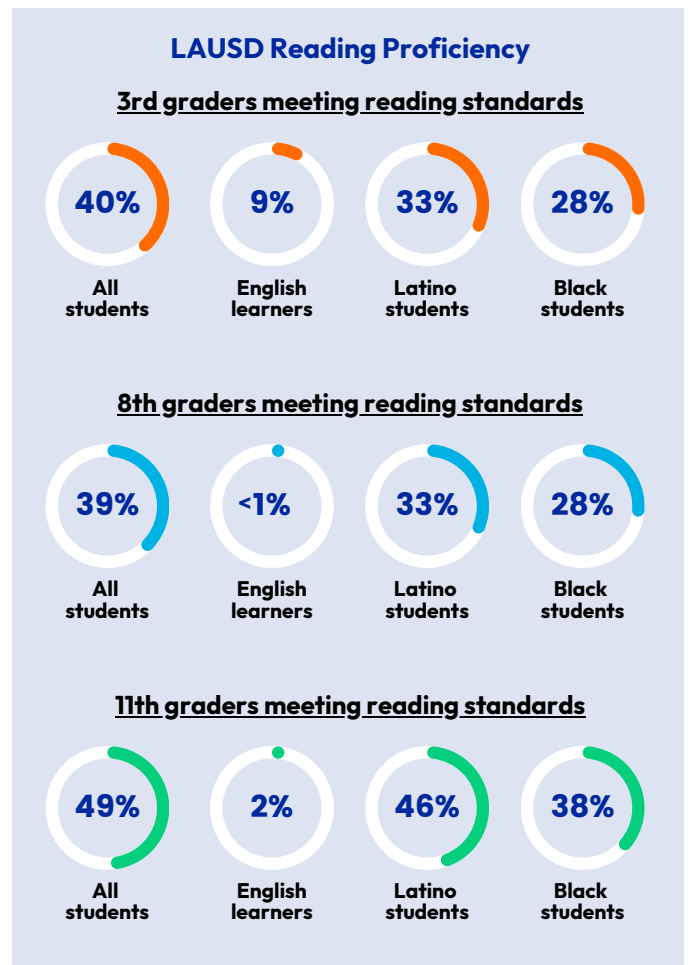
What is this measuring?

Reading proficiency means reading at or above grade level. We took a look at reading proficiency in LAUSD for 3rd graders, 8th graders, and 11th graders.

Key Takeaway

Less than half of LAUSD students are on grade level. Results are even lower for English learners and Latino and Black students. These challenges are not unique to LAUSD; as noted earlier, reading proficiency across California is also too low.

English learners need 5-7 years to master the English language. This is why for these students it is better to look at reading proficiency in eighth grade.



SCIENCE OF READING: THE PATH FORWARD FOR MORE EFFECTIVE LITERACY INSTRUCTION

The science of reading, sometimes referred to as **SoR**, is an evidence-based body of research about how students best learn to read. While the term is new, the research behind it goes back many decades. While several states have passed laws on SoR, which have resulted in remarkable progress in literacy rates over time, California lags behind.

A key contributing factor to our literacy crisis is the use of instructional practices that are not based on evidence. And yet, without a science-informed, coherent, and comprehensive state approach to teaching reading, school and district leaders are left to make critical decisions about reading curriculum and instruction without guidance and support while faced with mixed messages about what works.

One key finding of the science of reading is that learning to **read is not natural or automatic, it is a learned skill**, and as such learning to read requires systematic, explicit instruction.

Science of Reading Foundational Skills

Effective reading instruction includes five essential elements, also referred to as the **Five Pillars***:

- **Phonics**: matching sounds to letters or letter groups and blending them together
- **Phonemic awareness**: the ability to identify the different sounds that make up speech
- **Fluency**: the ability to read accurately and quickly
- **Vocabulary**: understanding the meaning of individual words
- **Comprehension**: making meaning of text

*Another fundamental skill is "oral language development," learning how words sound, what words and sentences mean, and how to communicate ideas. This is essential for all students, but especially for English language learners.

WHAT ELSE DO ENGLISH LEARNERS NEED?

All growing readers need foundational skills, such as phonics. These are important to effective literacy instruction and should be taught explicitly and systematically – tailored, of course, to students' needs. Multilingual learners do not require fundamentally different instruction from other students; rather, they need more:

- **oral language development**
- **vocabulary development**
- **background knowledge building**

Multilingual learners also need **explicit English language development (ELD)** and leveraging of home language and cross-language connections. Ensuring English learners are supported in these efforts, through effective integrated and designated ELD, can and should align with the SoR approach.

Learn more about how children learn to read

[Resources for Parents](#)

[Resources on Literacy](#)

[How Children Learn to Read](#)

[Raising Bilingual Kids](#)

[What is the Science of Reading?](#)

[Literacy Beyond Phonics: the importance of building knowledge](#)

[How to support your child with growing as a reader](#)

[Supporting English learning with literacy and reading](#)

PARENT VOICES ON LITERACY

Families In Schools engaged over 655 parents of Los Angeles Unified students and LAUSD teachers through polling and online journals in partnership with Global Strategy Group.

Perspectives on reading

Despite the high percentage of students not meeting reading standards,



51% of parents give their child an “A” when assessing their reading skills.

99% of parents believe reading skills are “extremely” or “very” important for their child’s success in school.

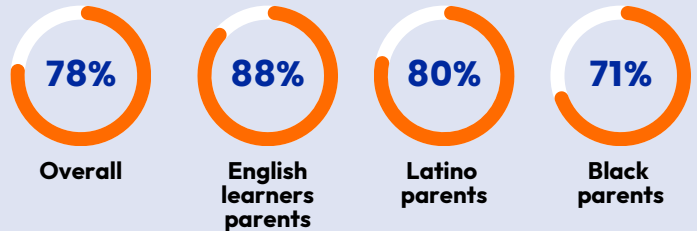


97% of parents believe they are “extremely” or “very” important for success in college and in future jobs.

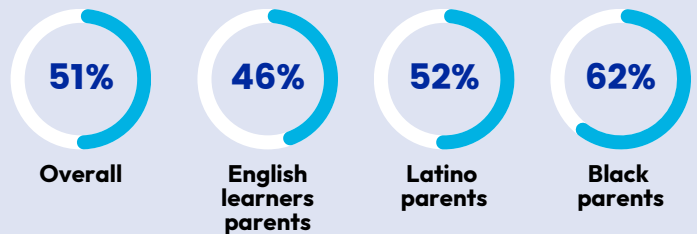
65% of parents believe that all students can learn to read with the proper instruction and support.

Resources and supports LAUSD parents need

Percentage of parents who help their children very or somewhat often with reading:



However, far fewer strongly agree that they have the tools needed to help their child learn how to read.



58% of parents say they have access to a school library. Parents feel **access to books and other reading materials** would be one of the most helpful resources for improving their child’s reading skills.



Knowledge of reading curriculum and instructional approaches

WHILE 93% of parents are interested in learning more about their child’s reading curriculum,

JUST 15% of parents are actually aware of the reading curriculum at their child’s school and

ONLY 27% of parents say information on their school’s approach to reading instruction is available.

PARENT VOICES ON LITERACY

44%

of parents overall have heard “nothing at all” or just “a little” about the term “science of reading,” with significant variation across groups:



English learners parents



Latino parents



Black parents



95%

of parents say it is extremely or very important to be able to **sound out and recognize words** in order to read.



96%

of English learner parents support training and support for teachers to **understand and implement the science of reading with English learners.**



98%

of parents support the passage of **laws that require or incentivize schools to provide training and support for teachers** to understand and implement the science of reading in their classrooms.

97%

of parents support the passage of laws to support **parents in helping their children learn how to read** using evidence-based approaches.

96%

of parents support the passage of **laws that require schools to incorporate evidence-based reading approaches.** The same percentage of English learner parents are in support.

Parent Voices Heard: Shifts coming in LAUSD

Los Angeles Unified is working on adding literacy into its family engagement efforts. They are developing a series of webinars on literacy, including the science of reading to share with parents, in addition to a course series for parents on the topic of foundational early literacy.

Families In Schools is asking LAUSD to take a multi-dimensional approach to family engagement that **truly views parents as equal partners and creates multiple avenues for families to learn about SoR** and how they can support reading outside of the classroom. Families should also **receive accurate information on their child’s progress** on a regular basis. These efforts and continued investments should be personalized to each school’s needs, prioritizing those schools with the lowest literacy outcomes.

This is a great example of advocacy in action where the needs of parents became a top priority for the district. On page 8, look for strategies and focal policy areas to improve the system to better serve our children.

THE PATH FORWARD:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES

To support the development of early literacy skills with your children at home and advocate for the needs of your children at school, here are some ideas for you and your family.

Help your child develop strong literacy habits.

- **Engage in nurturing talk and interaction** to help build your baby's brain.
- **Read aloud to your child** starting at birth in any language.
- **Provide your child with as many books as possible** to allow them to explore reading on their own.
- **Visit the local library** to access free books in multiple languages, technology resources, and activities.
- **Make limited screen time more focused on reading** and talk with your child about what they are hearing and seeing.

Engage with your child's school to understand literacy progress and advocate for supports as needed.

- **Establish a daily routine for attendance.** Missing school impacts a child's learning in kindergarten and beyond.
- During your parent-teacher conference, **get a clear understanding of your child's current reading level.** Are they above, on, or below grade level and by how much?
- **Ask teachers what materials they use to teach reading** and how it connects to the science of reading.
- Ask teachers for **strategies to support reading development at home.**
- **Request support in understanding assessment data,** including test scores and report cards.
- If you find that your child is behind, **ask what help students are receiving during the school day and what you can do to help your child at home.**
- **Advocate for supports** such as tutoring and summer programs as needed.

Interactive Literacy Resources

[Talking is Teaching](#)

[Family Literacy Activities](#)

[PBS Kids](#)

[Education.com](#)

[ABCya](#)

[Sesame Street](#)



My daily schedule is incredibly hectic, so having the opportunity to share moments reading with my son every day creates precious memories for

me.
- Parent



THE PATH FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

FAMILIES CAN ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE

As family leaders, you can **advocate for and support the implementation of key best practices**. Whether while attending a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) meeting, serving on a school site council, or speaking during public comment at a board of education meeting, **your voice can make a difference**.

District-level Advocacy

Los Angeles Unified district staff and local sites leaders should:

- **Publicly communicate** the district’s commitment to literacy as a key priority.
- **Scale and sustain training and supports** for all teachers and administrators around science of reading implementation.
- **Adopt only evidence-based curricula** and instructional materials across the district.
- Carefully **design instructional plans** and strategically allocate resources.
- **Monitor student progress** and address barriers to learning.
- **Equip families to play an active role** in supporting their students’ literacy journey.
- Make long-term commitments to **science of reading implementation** efforts.

City and Regional Leader Advocacy

City and regional leaders also have a role to play in elevating the literacy crisis and contributing to solutions to address it. They should:

- Identify new and continue existing **city-nonprofit-school district partnerships**.
- Utilize strategic **communication approaches to engage parents** and other community members around supporting literacy.

Community Partner Advocacy

Nonprofit and other partners play an important role in the education ecosystem. They should:

- Establish (and continue) **direct service partnerships** with schools and districts.
- Collaborate with schools/districts and other organizations to **raise literacy awareness**.

Action Plan

What are your next steps to support your child or all children to reach reading proficiency?

Next steps to support my child

Next steps for school/district advocacy
