

INTRODUCTION

The capacity to read is a fundamental skill that is crucial for a student's success in college and career. Students with strong reading abilities can solve problems, make decisions, have more confidence, and a higher sense of accomplishment. This is especially important for students of color, English learners, and students with learning differences, who face a persistent opportunity gap. While the majority of students in California are Black and Latinx, less than 40 percent of those students are proficient in reading and the reading gap is even greater based on economic disparities.¹ It is not surprising then that most other states outperform California in their reading outcomes, with California's reading scores declining for 8th grade between 2017 and 2019.²

As a group of Teach Plus Policy Fellows and educators who work with a diverse student population, we have witnessed the result of poor reading instruction and the detrimental effect it has on the achievement of our students. We have also seen colleagues who enter the classroom struggling to teach foundational reading skills to their students. That is not fair to the teacher or the students. In this brief, we offer recommendations for California leaders on preparing and supporting teachers so that all their students are equipped to read.

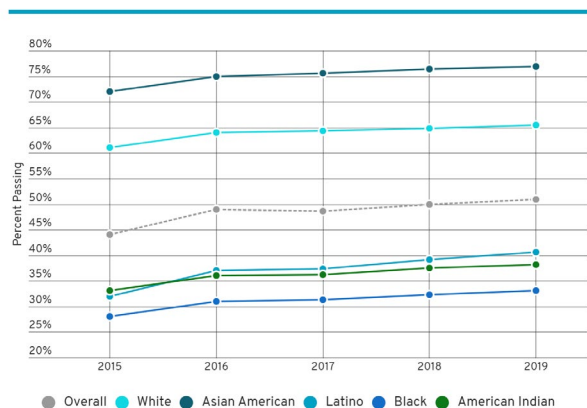
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

California Reading Outcomes

California students' reading outcomes are far from what we would want. The state is below the national average and is at the bottom half of all states in reading proficiency. The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that

less than a third of California's fourth and eighth graders are reading proficiently.³ To add to the challenge, California is one of the most diverse states in the country and there are many issues regarding equity and access in education that have a detrimental effect on student achievement. Reading outcomes are a clear example of such inequity. The outcomes of Black, LatinX and American Indian students have significantly trailed those of their white and Asian peers. As shown in Figure 1, there have been only minor improvements in overall reading proficiency over the last five years and these gaps between student groups have not closed.

Reading proficiency in CA by race, ethnicity 2015-2019



Source: California Department of Education

Figure 1. Reading Proficiency in California by Race and Ethnicity⁴ (California State Assessment)



As students progress through elementary school and into middle school, time spent on reading instruction and support decreases until it is almost completely absent at the high school level. Reading proficiency is vital to the academic development and future success of our students. Without it, students are 20 percent more likely to drop out of high school, a rate that is four times higher when compared to proficient readers. The percentage increases by a factor of two when we include socioeconomic factors.⁵ There is also a direct correlation between incarceration rates and literacy. Currently, half of the inmate population in California reads below

Teachers Voices: Our Reading Stories

Asha Hannah—Special Education and Ethnic Studies Teacher, Oakland



“Have you ever written a reading goal for an IEP? I have. It’s pretty hard. Mostly because there are so many different ways to measure reading skills. Phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension. A student can have perfect fluency, but struggle with comprehension. They can fully understand a text when it’s read aloud, and be able to answer comprehension questions, but struggle to sound out the words in a grade-level text. As a high school resource specialist, it was a struggle to prioritize reading in an IEP. How could I ensure that my students were working on a reading goal that they carried with them all day? They didn’t just need support in reading in their English classes, they needed support reading word problems in algebra, or the directions to a lab in science.”

a seventh grade level and 21 percent read below a third grade level.⁶ Illiteracy effectively cuts off access to opportunity and disproportionately affects high-need students.

The disparities in reading instruction increased during the year of distance learning caused by the pandemic. A study conducted by Amplify Education Inc. found that nearly 50 percent of first graders were well below grade level in reading in 2020 and that there was a significant decrease in the percentage of students on track to meet standards.⁷ The COVID-19 crisis has only highlighted that teachers need extensive support and training to meet the needs of these students, particularly to address the increased gap in achievement caused by the inequities of distance learning.

California Reading and Literacy Policy

Most recently, California was one of 13 states awarded a federal grant to develop a comprehensive literacy program. As part of the grant, the state created a literacy plan, a collection of resources outlining California’s frameworks and systems of support. The plan also includes overarching goals to align and integrate these resources in a coherent way to best serve students. In its plan, the state defines literacy in the 21st century as “students become[ing] broadly literate, meaning they engage with a variety of books and other texts across a wide range of genres, time periods, cultures, perspectives, and topics for a multitude of purposes.” While the state plan articulates using a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) focusing on several areas regarding academics, family and community engagement, celebration of diversity, and the whole child, for the purpose of this policy memo, we will focus on the section defining well-prepared and supported teachers and leaders.

According to the California Comprehensive State Literacy Plan, teachers are well-prepared when they meet the expectations of the Teacher Performance Expectations (TPEs), which address “the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for

the development of literacy, including the teaching of reading.” In addition, those teachers are also credentialed and appropriately assigned so that they support the needs of their students. Finally, school leaders support teachers when they guide and coach teachers using the TPEs and the content standards for learning.

When looking at all the performance expectations for teachers, the California Literacy Plan says, “A major task for teachers is to support all students in understanding how to shift registers and make informed language choices that meet the expectations of different disciplinary contexts. Thus, there is a need for professional learning for all teachers, not just ELA teachers, in literacy instruction.”⁸ The plan explicitly states that our plan is for birth-12th grade. However, currently there is no statewide reading or literacy assessment to show competency in reading instruction for secondary teaching candidates in non-ELA subject areas. The literacy teaching standards do not apply to teaching expectations for secondary teachers.

Teacher Preparation

For multiple subject credentials, aspiring teachers must pass the RICA (Reading Instruction Competence Assessment), but beyond this, professional development and monitoring in reading are limited. Like any standardized test, studying for the RICA simply leads to success on the RICA and does not correlate to effective reading instruction in the classroom. With respect to the Teacher Performance Expectations, multiple subject and special education specialists are the only teachers who currently have course content aligned to reading instruction. In addition, there are few, if any performance evaluations that include criteria on reading performance or instruction. For science and math teachers who hold single-subject credentials, there is very little preparation or instruction on how to teach reading if they enter the profession the traditional way through university coursework. If this is bypassed, as is the case with many CTE (Career Technical Education) teachers, they enter the classroom with no knowledge on how to incorporate reading and literacy instruction into their curriculum. As a consequence, many single-subject STEM teachers at both the middle and high school levels are attempting to give reading instruction with no training or understanding of the science of reading.

Along with the gaps found in reading instruction through teacher preparation programs, the teacher induction programs to obtain a clear credential fare no better in offering clear support and training in reading instruction. Across the state, programs vary widely from county to county but have in common a lack of training in reading instruction and support. For teachers, this represents another lost opportunity to develop the necessary background and skill to teach reading.

Teachers Voices: Our Reading Stories

Jose Rivas—Physics and Engineering Teacher, Lennox

“Reading instruction and literacy development have always seemed an afterthought in science, math, and engineering education. The focus has always been on getting students to be adept at being able to do the problems but not necessarily in developing reading and literacy strategies. The reason for this is that most science, math, and CTE teachers have no idea how to incorporate reading and literacy instruction into their curriculum so that it is authentic. This falls back to our teacher training programs and the lack of training in reading instruction. As science/math/CTE teachers, our training is very limited, resulting in a lack of confidence to teach reading and literacy.”



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Prepare teachers to teach reading at both primary and secondary levels.

Although there are required literacy standards for secondary teachers outlined in state frameworks, there aren't clear expectations of those secondary teachers to show competency through examination or coursework. The lack of reading instruction is especially true in CTE, science, and math content areas where teachers are not trained or understand the science of reading to effectively support students. Reading instruction is a responsibility of all teachers in all content areas and teacher preparation must reflect this fact. A robust approach is needed in reading instruction with relevant professional development and performance expectations across all grade levels and all content areas that includes:

- + A research-based approach to reading instruction that is content and grade level-specific.
- + Reading instruction training that prepares teachers to support students at the middle and high school levels.
- + Literacy Teacher Performance Expectations that address subject-specific pedagogy for all single-subject teachers and are integrated into the development of new teachers across all content areas and credentials.

Teachers Voices: Our Reading Stories



Gretchen Eisenhut—Literacy Teacher on Special Assignment, Nevada City

“When I completed my program and began teaching, I had two years of mentorship via the California Teacher Induction program. Both of my mentors guided me through the steps necessary to clear my credential, but when it came to the art of teaching reading I was told, ‘Teach the standards.’ As a new teacher, I taught reading via the teacher’s manuals, and via the teaching standards that my team determined were not covered in the curriculum. The assumption was that by following the curriculum, and developing resources to support the outlying standards, students would be given a full instructional program in reading.”

2. Hold institutions accountable for ensuring candidates are competent in teaching reading at all levels.

While primary teacher candidates are already held accountable for demonstrating proficiency in reading instruction, university and teacher preparation programs must also be held accountable if they do not prepare candidates to teach reading effectively at all levels. Teacher preparation and induction programs must provide the reading instruction courses and skills needed to develop competency. The state should clearly articulate the expectations regarding accountability for teacher preparation and induction programs which should include:

- + Professional development and effective reading instruction for candidates.
- + A focus on providing coursework that prepares teacher candidates to deliver research-based reading instruction, especially for STEM single-subject credential programs.
- + A candidate literacy plan as part of the accreditation process, including outcome measures based on state-adopted assessments for teacher candidates at all levels.

Teachers Voices: Our Reading Stories

Nikysha Gilliam—English Language Development Teacher, Los Angeles

“When I became a high school English and English Language Development (ELD) teacher two years ago, it became more and more clear that students were reaching high school with reading skills that were below basic, but were required to read and work on grade level in classrooms where teachers are masters of their content, but not the art and science of teaching students how to read and engage with the text. In my own high school English department meetings, teachers sometimes lament about students lacking reading skills to really dig into a text, and because students have limited abilities, they don't do the assignments. Teachers were frustrated that they were held accountable for the test scores of students who came to them lacking skills that they were ill-equipped to teach as single-subject credential holders.”



3. Prioritize reading instruction by investing in ongoing support for all teachers and students in the classroom.

The state should make ongoing investments in providing professional development and research-based curriculum on reading instruction. Through an ongoing grant program, LEAs would be required to have comprehensive plans for improving reading instruction and outcomes that include tailored professional development and research-based curriculum, responding to evolving student needs as demonstrated by student assessments. While one-time funds, as allocated in the 2021-22 state budget, are helpful in the short-term, reading instruction is so critical that we believe there should be ongoing funding that would require all LEAs to provide:

- + Effective research-based curriculum that supports reading instruction at all grade levels and content areas.
- + Professional development that spans K-12 that is research-based and content-specific, especially for teachers with single-subject credentials.
- + Effective reading assessments that can pinpoint students who are struggling in reading, and provide appropriate interventions at all grade levels.

Teachers Voices: Our Reading Stories

Jennifer Click—Chemistry Teacher, Fresno



"I teach a subject that is not often associated with reading: Chemistry. While we may read scientific articles or laboratory procedures, the bulk of my subject relies heavily on problem-solving. I convinced my administration to purchase a nonfiction novel about science for my class to read. I was so excited as an avid reader myself. However, I learned very quickly that beyond a handful of strategies for analyzing scientific text, I didn't know much about how to teach reading in a meaningful and impactful way. I didn't know how to have students interact with the text or with each other about the ideas they formed while reading. I didn't know how to help students process and understand what they were reading. I tried to remember learning any of those skills and strategies during my credential program and couldn't think of anything. I was on my own trying to find, implement, and successfully use reading strategies in my classroom. Students still need assistance in reading in middle and high school, it doesn't end after elementary school."

CONCLUSION

Effective reading instruction is essential for the success of our students, yet California has an opportunity gap in reading instruction that disproportionately affects students of color and students with IEPs. Responsibility for closing this gap cannot fall to the teacher alone. Teachers must be trained at all grade levels and in all content areas to ensure that all students are receiving effective, research-based instruction in reading. Induction programs and teacher preparation programs must also provide effective training to support teachers in reading instruction as they enter the classroom and obtain a teaching credential, while school and district leaders must invest in comprehensive strategies for support and improvement. This can only happen if priority is given in the state budget to address the reading gap in California, ensuring that students have access to the reading instruction they deserve. The responsibility belongs to all of us—state policymakers, district and school leaders, teachers, and the institutions that prepare them. Together we can change the trajectory for student outcomes in reading proficiency.

AUTHORS

TEACH PLUS CALIFORNIA POLICY FELLOWS

Jennifer Click
Gretchen Eisenhut
Nikysha Gilliam
Asha Hannah
Jose Rivas*

*Lead Author

Sarah Lillis, Teach Plus California Executive Director

ENDNOTES

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