



StriveTogether®

Every child. Cradle to career.

Cradle-to-Career Outcomes Playbook: Early Grade Reading

The foundation laid in the early grades — kindergarten, first, second and third grade — plays a crucial role in future success. One especially important milestone is reaching reading proficiency. Research shows that children who develop strong early reading skills are far more likely to excel in school and in life. But significant disparities persist, caused by differences in access to high-quality early education, well-trained teachers, effective curricula, aligned interventions and enrichment support, resources, and community systems.

Building a foundation for early literacy requires a coordinated community effort, including investments in education, health

care, neighborhoods and access to supportive environments. Community-based organizations can drive this effort, aligning partners toward a shared goal: ensuring every child is on track for reading success by the end of third grade.

The StriveTogether Outcomes Playbook: Early Grade Reading is a comprehensive guide to the latest research and best practices for this outcome, made possible by support from the Gates Foundation. Communities can use the playbook to identify local needs, prioritize areas for collective action and design tailored strategies. With coordinated efforts, we can ensure every child meets this important milestone.

>>>>>> Why Early Grade Reading Matters

- **Academic impact:** Third grade reading proficiency strongly predicts high school graduation, college enrollment and performance across all subjects — not just language arts.
- **Social and behavioral benefits:** Early literacy is linked to better social skills, reduced aggression and greater academic engagement, especially among students experiencing poverty.
- **Equity implications:** Reading gaps disproportionately affect students of color and low-income students, with National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data showing that 80% and up of Black, Hispanic and Native American fourth graders reading below proficiency.



How to use the StriveTogether Outcomes Playbook: Early Grade Reading

Mathematica's Education-to-Workforce Framework is the inspiration behind the playbook's organization and content. The playbook provides research-based guidance to help community leaders:

- Identify priorities
- Track key indicators to measure community-level progress
- Design strategies with stakeholders
- Build collective support for investments in early childhood development



Essential Questions for Early Grade Reading

The playbook addresses 23 essential questions to guide planning, offering actionable practices, policies and indicators for tracking progress. The essential questions are grouped into five focus areas:

1. Early Grade Reading Progress

- Are young learners demonstrating the academic progress needed to be considered "on track" for early grades?
- Are young learners mastering the five pillars of early literacy?
- Are young learners meeting reading benchmarks for third grade?

2. Leadership for Literacy

- Does the Local Education Agency (LEA) have a clear vision and strategy for advancing early literacy aligned to the Science of Reading?

- Has the LEA adopted standards and coherent curricular materials aligned to the vision?
- Does the LEA use quality data and assessment resources consistently, coherently and strategically to drive instructional decision making for all students?

3. Teaching and Learning

- Does each school have a well-trained, specialized early literacy team to facilitate a flexible, equitable literacy program?
- Does the school maximize and direct time to continuously improve the effectiveness of instruction and intervention?
- Are teachers and schools making significant contributions to academic growth for students?
- Do students have effective, representative teachers and leaders?
- Do students have access to curricula aligned to the Science of Reading research, including explicit phonics instruction?
- Do students attend schools in systems with adequate funding to support curricula, professional learning and ongoing coaching needed to implement the Science of Reading?
- Do students have access to teachers trained, coached and supported to teach the Science of Reading?
- Are students who are behind grade level identified early and provided high-quality interventions aligned to the curriculum?

4. Experiences and Neighborhood Conditions

- Do families live in well-resourced neighborhoods?
- Do families with children have access to public support (e.g., health care access, nutrition programs, economic support)?
- Do families have a literacy-rich environment and routines at home?
- Do students have access to after-school and summer enrichment programming to prevent learning loss?

5. Positive School Environments

- Do young learners attend schools with safe, inclusive and supportive environments?
- Do young learners attend schools that prioritize their social, emotional and physical development and well-being?
- Are young learners demonstrating consistent attendance?
- Are there young learners who disproportionately experience exclusionary discipline?
- Are young learners demonstrating positive behavior?