

Iowa Schools are Making a Difference in Early Literacy

A Policy Brief

Reading in Iowa: A Call to Action

Reading by the end of third grade is a critical predictor of success. Research shows students who are proficient readers by the end of third grade are more likely to succeed in school, graduate, go on to college, and earn a living wage¹. Students who are not proficient readers by the end of third grade are more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to obtain postsecondary education, and less likely to make a living wage.

In Iowa, reading assessment scores have been stagnant for years, and nearly one in four Iowa students is not proficient in reading. These factors were a call to action for a systemic approach to improving early literacy results statewide. Iowa educators had begun this work when the Branstad-Reynolds administration proposed, and state legislators passed, a comprehensive early literacy law in 2012 that focuses on ensuring all students are proficient readers by the end of third grade (Iowa Code 279.68).

Focus on Early Intervention

A critical component of this statewide effort is an early warning system for literacy. This system is designed to help educators identify and intervene with students in kindergarten through third grade who are at risk for reading difficulties. The early warning system, which was fully implemented in Iowa schools in 2014, includes screening the reading skills of all K-3 students three times a year, providing additional reading instruction to children who need it, and monitoring their progress. Iowa's early warning system relies on research-based tools and resources that produce accurate data quickly, so that educators can identify gaps in reading performance early on while the gaps are small and easier to address.

Student Results Improve Statewide

The work to put in place a statewide early warning system has begun to pay off: Student results on the screening assessments have improved statewide. In the 2015-16 school year, the number of students who met or exceeded benchmarks on the screening assessments grew 4.2 percentage points from fall to spring, from 63.4 percent to 67.6 percent. That's a difference of 8,923 children in school districts large and small. If Iowa schools can maintain this level of growth in years to come, it will translate into thousands of students getting on track to be proficient readers.

Top district performers saw increases up to **32.2** percentage points.



8,923 children went from missing to meeting or exceeding benchmarks during the school year.



¹Annie E. Casey Foundation. *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*. <http://www.aecf.org/resources/early-warning-why-reading-by-the-end-of-third-grade-matters/>
Annie E. Casey Foundation. *Early Warning Confirmed*. <http://www.aecf.org/resources/early-warning-confirmed/>



Iowa's Stagnant Test Scores

Iowa's reading scores on state and national assessments (the Iowa Assessments and the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP) had stagnated for years. Our state's scores had not dropped, but they had not improved. While other states had successfully implemented early warning programs in reading, Iowa lacked a statewide system.

Iowa's Early Literacy Law

Iowa's early literacy law, adopted by the Legislature in 2012, focuses on making sure all students are proficient readers by the end of third grade. The law requires:²

- An early warning system to screen all students in kindergarten through third grade and to identify students at risk for reading difficulties.
- Research-based intervention and monitoring of progress to get struggling readers back on track.
- Communication between schools and parents of children who are struggling.
- Intensive summer reading programs starting in May 2018 for struggling readers at the end of third grade.
- Possible retention at the end of third grade for a small number of students.

Iowa schools, area education agencies, and the Iowa Department of Education have responded to the early literacy law with a focus on prevention of reading difficulties and early intervention for students. The law reinforced the importance of teachers having the data and resources they need to provide effective literacy instruction, as well as the need to provide early intervention for students who have fallen behind in reading skills.

What is Iowa's Early Warning System?

Early warning systems are designed to allow educators to quickly identify which students are at risk of struggling in reading as soon as they enter school. Iowa's early warning system was implemented through Collaborating for Iowa's Kids, a statewide partnership between the Iowa Department of Education, area education agencies, and school districts. The early warning system has four components:

- **Universal screening assessments:** Schools screen students in kindergarten through third grade three times a year – fall, winter, and spring – using a state-approved assessment to identify children at risk for reading difficulties. Most schools use the Formative Assessment System for Teachers (FAST). Based on screening results, schools determine the literacy status of children: Adequately progressing, at risk, or persistently at risk.
- **Reading intervention:** Schools must provide additional reading instruction (intervention) for students identified as persistently at risk. Intervention is recommended for students identified as at risk.
- **Progress monitoring:** Schools must further monitor the progress of students identified as at risk and persistently at risk using screening assessments.
- **Data System:** Iowa educators adapt instructional practices using student literacy data accessed through the Iowa TIER data management system.

Iowa's early warning system has been used by every district in Iowa to meet requirements of Iowa's early literacy law, and it has served as the foundation of Iowa's system of accountability and support for schools, known as Differentiated Accountability.

Early warning systems quickly

identify students at risk.



Sustainable Growth Statewide

Iowa's early warning system is working. Analyses of 2015-16 school year data from the 398 public school districts and nonpublic schools using the early warning system show improvement in the percentage of Iowa's kindergarten through third-grade students demonstrating the early literacy skills needed to score at or above benchmark on the screening assessments.

Growth and Progress Seen Statewide

Of 398 public school districts and nonpublic schools using the early warning system, 60.8 percent (242) saw an increase in the percentage of students in kindergarten through third grade at or above benchmark from fall 2015 to spring 2016.

The top 10 school districts and nonpublic schools with the highest growth in K-3 students at or above benchmark on screening assessments from fall 2015 to spring 2016 demonstrated increases ranging from 19.5 to 32.2 percentage points. Fifty-three school districts showed double-digit increases.

Many districts have been growing steadily in the percent of students at or above benchmark consistently over several screening periods. The Carroll Community School District, for example, showed steady increases across all three screening periods in 2015-16, moving from 73.2 percent in the fall to 79.9 percent during the winter, and 81.6 percent in the spring. The Council Bluffs Community School District has shown regular increases in the percentage of students at or above benchmark for the last five consecutive screening periods, ultimately growing from 46.8 percent in spring 2015 to 56.3 percent in fall 2017. This type of steady change over a long period of time is how results are best sustained.

53 school districts showed double-digit increases.



Urban Districts Experience Growth

All of the school districts in Iowa's urban centers either maintained performance or demonstrated increases in the percentage of K-3 students at or above benchmark on screening assessments during 2015-16, despite often being the same districts with large percentages of students not meeting proficiency on the state assessment in reading. Waterloo schools showed the greatest growth on screening assessments, with a 14.6 percentage-point increase from fall to spring.

Waterloo schools showed an increase of **14.6** percentage points, the highest among urban schools.



Using the Right Measures at the Right Time

So why doesn't this type of growth also quickly show up in scores on state and national assessments?

With reading, we use screening assessments on a frequent basis – three times a year – to help monitor progress toward grade-level targets. These grade-level targets are closely tied to larger-scale standardized measures of reading achievement (Iowa Assessments and the National Assessment of Educational Progress). Ongoing screening assessments are designed to measure small but observable changes in reading skills that will predict later success. Student performance on these screening assessments detect positive changes that will be observed in student gains on large-scale standardized assessments later.

To use a weight-loss analogy, a person who changed his eating habits in an effort to lose weight might notice his pants fit more loosely well before his progress is reflected on the bathroom scale. While the bathroom scale measures and displays changes in larger units – a pound, rather than smaller increments that still matter, such as an ounce or half-pound – pants are another way to monitor progress; changes in fit (tight or loose) are noticed more quickly.

Another reason the growth and progress from Iowa's screening assessments is not yet reflected on the state assessment or NAEP is that the early literacy law applies to students in kindergarten through third grade. Iowa students take the state assessment for the first time in third grade and NAEP for the first time in fourth grade. We can expect to see an impact on state assessment results once all students who have benefited from early intervention have taken the state assessment. As of now, only about 25 percent of Iowa students who have been screened through the early warning system have also taken the state assessment.

Using Early Warning Data for Improvement

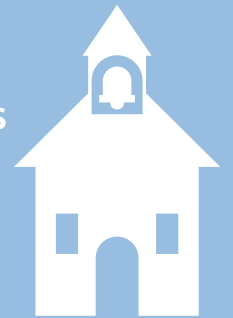
An early warning system only works if the information gained is used to help improve teaching and learning. While 2015-16 data show that 60.8 percent of Iowa's districts and nonpublic schools have shown improvement in the percent of students at or above benchmark, 39.2 percent have shown no growth or a decline. To continue to improve literacy results, the Iowa Department of Education, area education agencies, and school districts are working together to deliver a comprehensive improvement system in literacy that focuses on:

- 1. Revised and Improved School Improvement System:** The state's new system for accountability and support, Differentiated Accountability, focuses early literacy resources where districts and schools need them most and supports schools with facilitation and coaching for their teachers. The system provides resources in data use, literacy instruction, and curriculum.
- 2. Statewide Professional Learning and Support:** Evidence-based professional learning and training opportunities are available for all Iowa school districts and nonpublic schools at no cost. Last fall, more than 3,000 participants received professional learning and coaching support in data-based decision-making and enhancing their universal instruction in literacy. Educators attending the trainings learned to use data on early literacy to inform instructional practices.

In addition to that work, the Iowa Reading Research Center, created by the Legislature, provides resources and support to schools.

The Iowa Department of Education, in collaboration with the area education agencies and the Iowa Reading Research Center, is proposing a three-year, \$3.5 million-a-year project to build a sustainable professional learning system to support about 7,000 Iowa teachers of kindergarten through third grade in early literacy education. The statewide system will help raise reading achievement by ensuring Iowa children are taught using evidence-based instructional strategies.

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Conclusion

Efforts that began in 2012 to systemically implement a statewide early warning system have already had a positive impact in the growth of literacy skills for students in kindergarten through third grade. The hard work of Iowa's educators and ongoing statewide work to implement the early warning system led to a 4.2 percentage-point increase in students at or above benchmark on screening assessments from the fall of 2015 to the spring of 2016. These positive changes in growth have occurred in school districts of all sizes. Ultimately, these efforts have put Iowa on track to ensuring Iowa students are proficient readers by the end of third grade. With continued dedication and commitment to supporting and implementing the early warning system, these results are meaningful and sustainable.