

Early Literacy Is the Foundation to Equitable Opportunity: Why AB 1454 Matters

Implications for the Inland Empire

2025

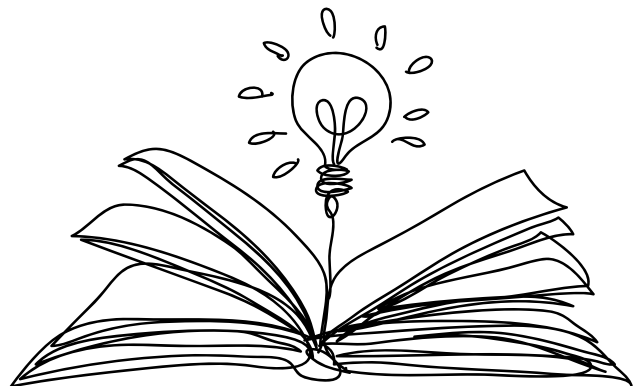
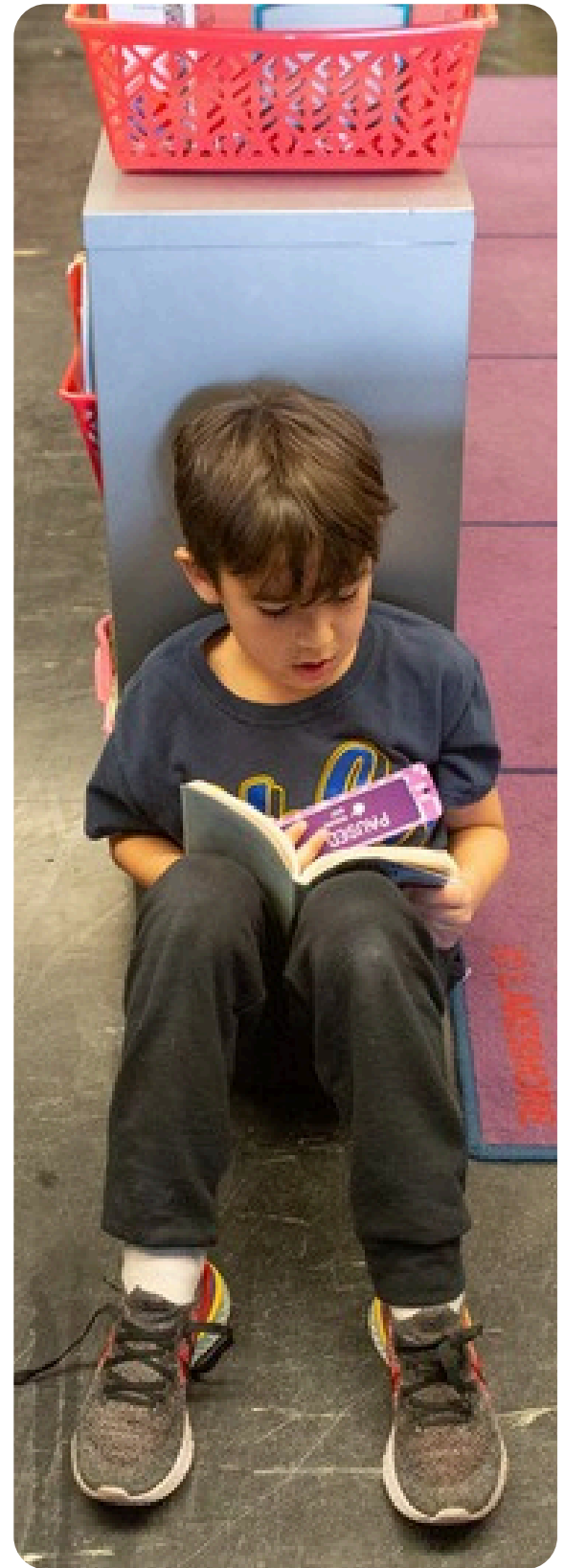


Table of Contents

Introduction	3
The Literacy Crisis in the Inland Empire	4
Differences across Student Subgroups	5
Differences across Schools and Districts	7
Why AB 1454 Matters	9
A Road Map for Local Action	10
References	12-13



Introduction

When we read, we don't just process words; we step into someone else's shoes. As Paul Armstrong writes in *How Literature Plays with the Brain*:

Reading novels, plays, and poems... provides a laboratory in which the brain can experiment with its social skills—testing, challenging, extending, and scrutinizing habitual practices for knowing others (Armstrong, 144).

Reading shapes meaning, forges connections, and builds community by passing along shared values and knowledge. Research shows that early reading proficiency not only predicts success across academic subjects but is also tied to higher rates of high school completion and college enrollment. Beyond academics, children who become confident readers early often demonstrate stronger social skills, greater engagement in the classroom, and fewer behavioral challenges.



The Literacy Crisis in the Inland Empire

Yet the data on English Language Arts/Literacy rates tell a sobering story. In the Inland Empire, only **37%** of third graders perform at grade level, compared to **43%** statewide. In practical terms, this means that about two-thirds of third graders in the region (**36,923** out of **58,363 students**) struggle not only to read and interpret texts appropriate for their age, but also to produce purposeful writing, communicate effectively, and analyze and present information.

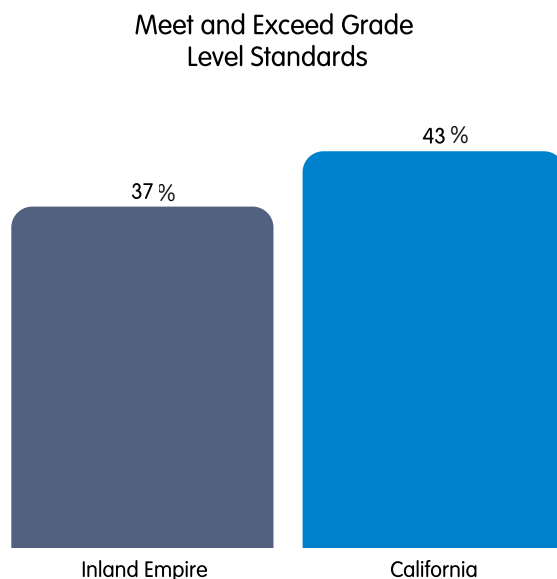


Figure 1: 2023–2024 3rd Grade CAASPP English Language Arts Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment



Differences across Student Subgroups

These average proficiency rates mask even deeper inequities in the Inland Empire, with wide performance gaps across student groups across race, gender, language status, and socioeconomic background.

Inland Empire
Meet and Exceed Reading Standards

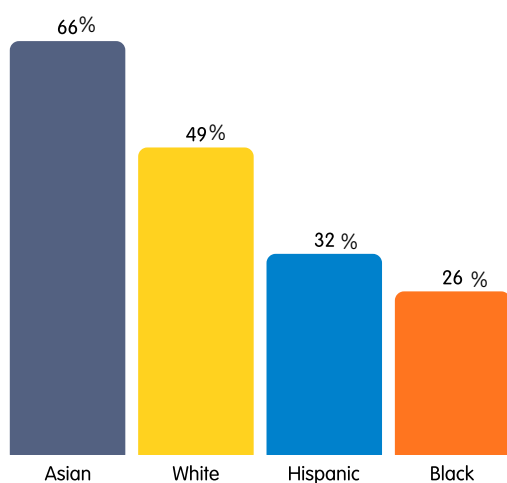


Figure 3: 2023–2024 3rd Grade CAASPP English Language Arts
Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment by Gender

Inland Empire
Meet and Exceed Reading Standards

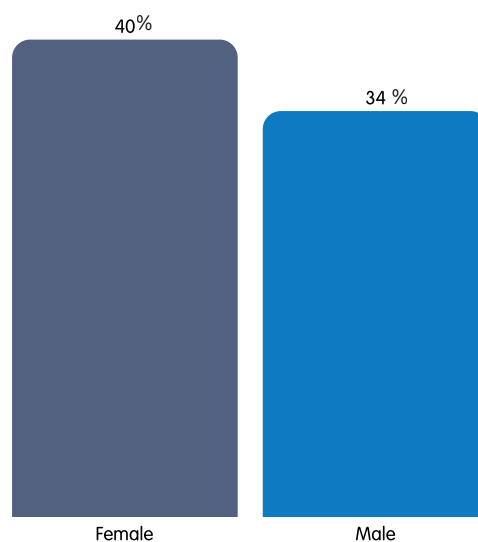


Figure 2: 2023–2024 3rd Grade CAASPP English Language Arts
Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment by Race/Ethnicity





Inland Empire Meet and Exceed Reading Standards

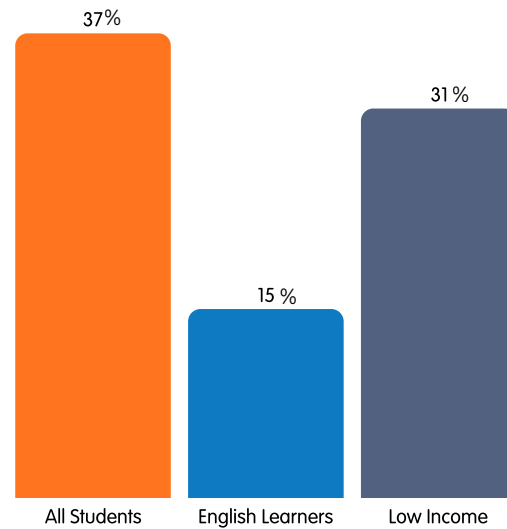


Figure 4: 2023–2024 3rd Grade CAASPP English Language Arts Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment by Language fluency and Socioeconomic Status

These disparities reflect the compounded effects of poverty, English learner status, and racial inequities, and highlight where targeted interventions are most urgently needed so that our students are not left further behind.



Differences across Schools and Districts

Another indicator of inequity is the variation in reading performance between schools and districts. While multiple factors contribute to literacy outcomes, the persistent disparities between districts underscore the pressing need to address the impact of socioeconomic inequalities on educational opportunity at a regional level.

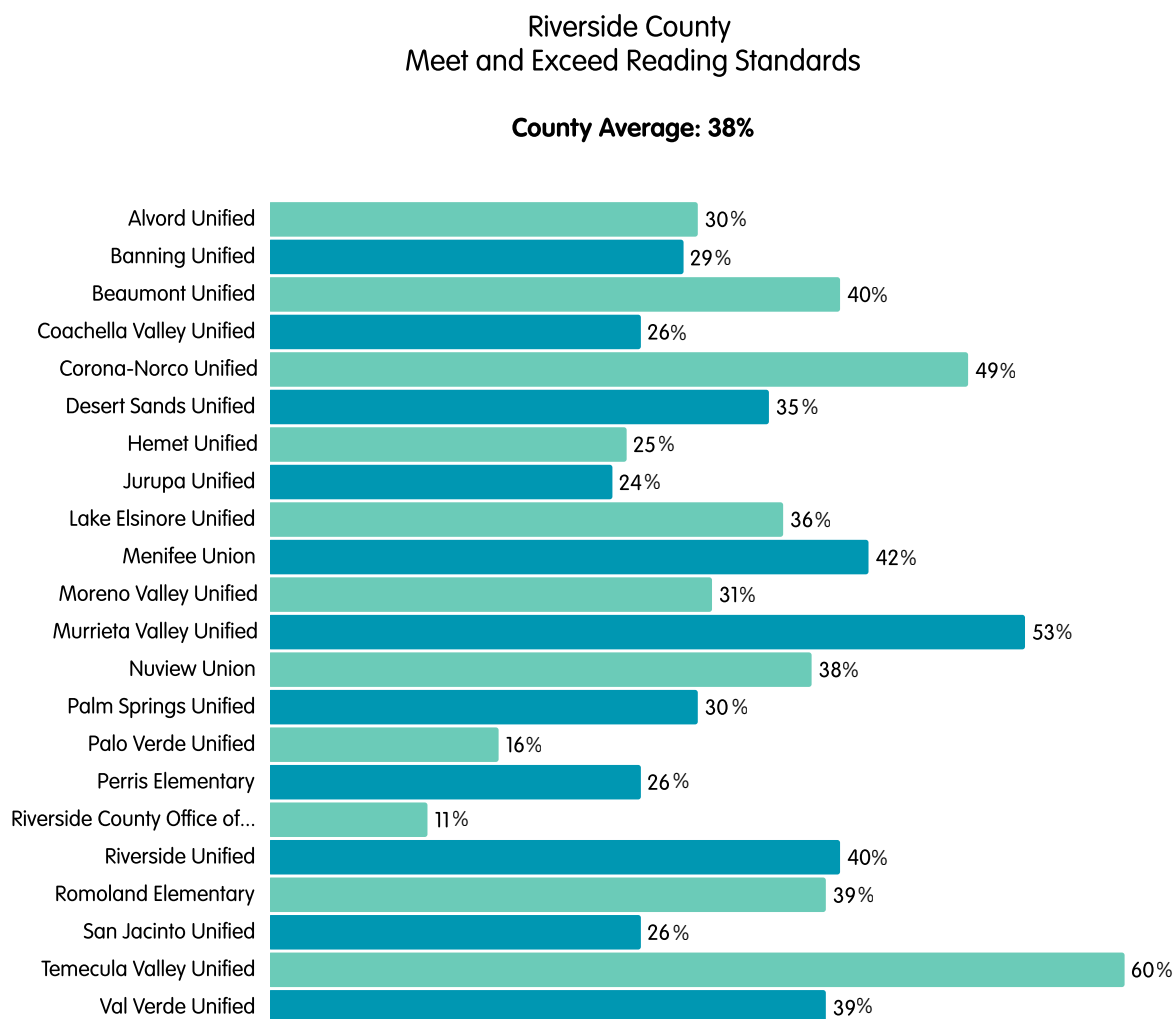


Figure 5: 2023–2024 3rd Grade CAASPP English Language Arts
Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment by District
(Riverside County)

San Bernardino County Meet and Exceed Reading Standards

County Average: 36%

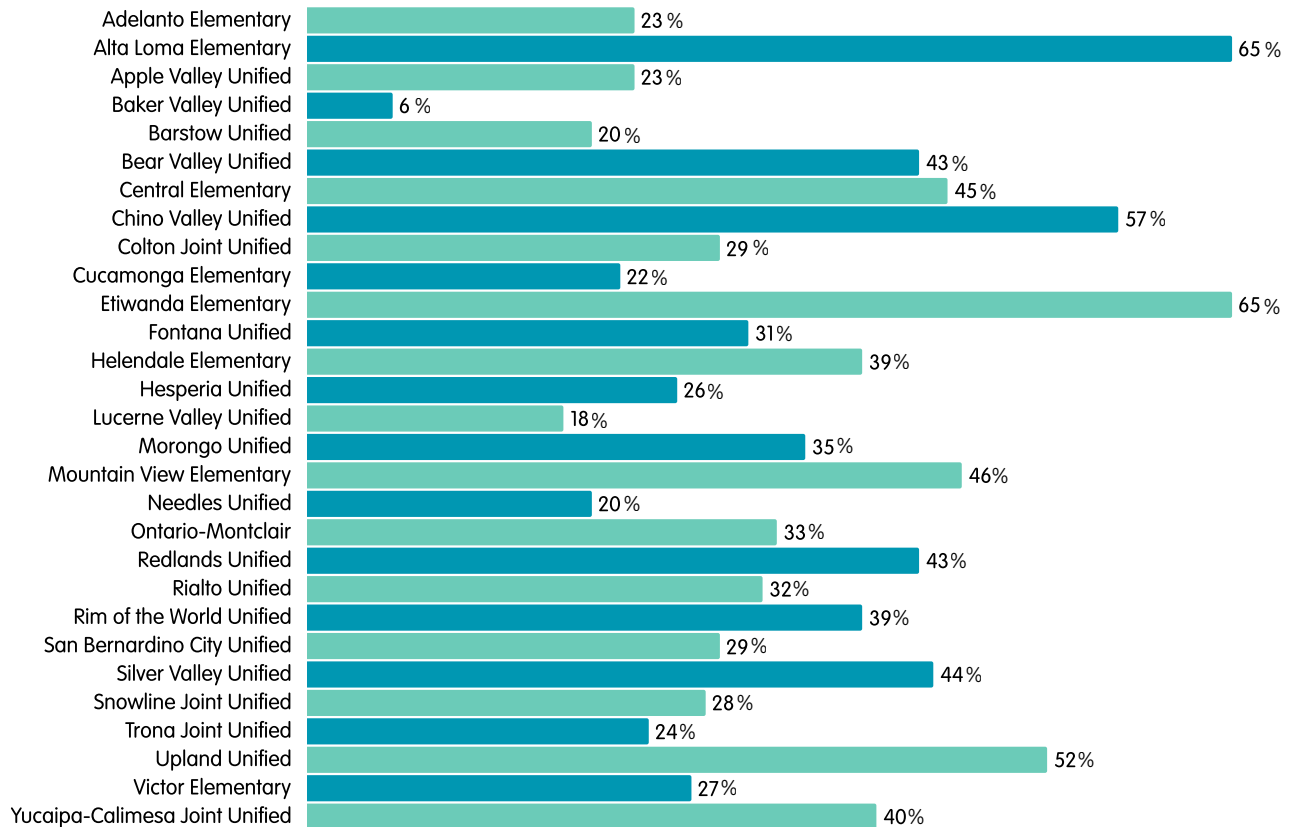


Figure 6: 2023–2024 3rd Grade CAASPP English Language Arts
Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment by District
(San Bernardino County)

As Professor of Education Policy Pasi Sahlberg notes in *Finnish Lessons: What the World Can Learn from Educational Change in Finland*?

[I]nvesting as early as possible in high-quality education for all students and directing additional resources toward the most disadvantaged students is a cost-effective strategy that produces the greatest impact on improving overall academic performance (Sahlberg, 78).

Reading performance disparities matter because third grade is a pivotal turning point in literacy development. Without strong reading foundations by this stage, the gaps between students (and between districts) tend to widen over time, shaping not only educational outcomes but also, in the long term, the entire socioeconomic landscape of a region.

Literacy experts agree that by third grade, students are expected to shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Falling behind has lifelong consequences: children not proficient by third grade are much more likely to drop out of high school, and this challenge continues into adulthood. The students who struggle in third grade often become the adults who face limited opportunities later in life. As a result, too many of our residents are locked out of higher-paying jobs, further education, and full community participation.



Why AB 1454 Matters

Closing these gaps will require large-scale and systemic educational change. One recent effort in this direction is California's Assembly Bill 1454, which recently passed with amendments and bipartisan support and is awaiting the governor's signature (as of September 30, 2025). The bill, which carries \$200 million in funding, emphasizes evidence-based literacy instruction, alignment with the Science of Reading, adoption of high-quality materials, and stronger teacher training. While not the only path forward, it reflects a growing recognition that literacy must be addressed with urgency. In today's digital world, where AI, chatbots, and social media shape how young people consume information, reading critically is a safeguard. Without it, students are more likely to outsource their judgment to algorithms instead of developing informed perspectives.

In June 2025, California unveiled the Golden State Literacy Plan, a comprehensive blueprint to transform early literacy. The plan invests in literacy coaches, universal screening for reading challenges such as dyslexia, professional development for teachers, and updated instructional guidance aligned to the Science of Reading. But a plan is only as strong as its implementation. AB1454 legally anchors the Literacy Plan by requiring credential programs, teacher training, and instructional materials to align with research-based practices. While the Golden State Literacy Plan identifies the state's most urgent literacy needs, AB 1454 supplies the policy and funding framework to execute that vision in classrooms across California.

But the rollout of this legislation will be gradual. By June 2027, the State Board of Education is required to approve new instructional materials in English Language Arts (ELA) and English Language Development (ELD) for grades K–8. In addition, by September 2029, the Commission on Teacher Credentialing must ensure that all administrator preparation and internship programs comply with the updated standards, among other provisions.

A Road Map for Local Action

Some may argue that in the digital age, reading traditional texts matters less. After all, today's students will navigate online platforms, multimedia content, and other emerging technologies. But this is a false choice. Digital literacy depends on foundational literacy. Most fifteen-second social media reels are not meant for building the critical thinking, analytical, and communication skills necessary for academic, civic, and professional success.

Strong reading skills are also the foundation of democratic participation. They enable students to evaluate online sources, detect misinformation, and recognize bias, abilities that are indispensable in today's polarized political climate. Without fluency and strong reading comprehension, young people are left vulnerable to the flood of half-truths and distortions that shape public opinion. A child who cannot master a third-grade text will struggle to navigate complex information, distinguish facts from fake news, or engage responsibly in digital spaces.

While state-level policy reforms are critical, local leaders in the Inland Empire cannot afford to wait. Districts can start by:

- Auditing instructional materials.
- Investing in teacher professional development.
- Sharing best practices regionally.
- Equipping administrators to support evidence-based instruction.

Districts that act early will be better positioned to pilot effective programs and attract state funding. Literacy is foundational to equity, civic life, democracy, and socioeconomic mobility. To deny that opportunity to **two out of three** Inland Empire students is an educational failure, with serious long-term consequences for educational equity and regional prosperity. If the Inland Empire is to be a region of consequence for California, it cannot afford to wait. The time to act on literacy is now.

As outlined in our new [Strategic Plan](#), GIA is committed to accelerating early literacy by convening district leaders, supporting teacher preparation, empowering families, and investing in innovative programs. Working with schools and community partners, we aim to give every child in the Inland Empire the foundation to read, learn, thrive, and fully participate in civic life. By acting now, the Inland Empire can lead in demonstrating how regional collaboration accelerates literacy and closes equity gaps. We invite you to be part of this effort: petition your legislative representatives to support AB 1454, urge local school boards to adopt practices that accelerate reading comprehension, and share effective strategies with GIA so we can amplify what works. Together, we can ensure that every child in our region has the opportunity to succeed

References

Armstrong, Paul. How Literature Plays with the Brain. The Neuroscience of Reading and Art. Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore, 2013.

[California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress](#) (CAASPP).

California Department of Education. [“Announcing the California Literacy Professional Learning Pack: California’s New Resources to Support Literacy Instruction”](#). May 20, 2025.

Cottingham, Benjamin W. and Jeannie Myung. [“Improving the Instructional Core at Scale”](#). Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), June 2025.

Ed Source Roundtable. [Reading by Third Grade: What Parents and Teachers Can Do](#). Ed source, January 23, 2023.

Ed Source Staff. [“California Lawmakers Rush to Pass Key Education Bills Before Deadline”](#). Ed Source, August 20, 2025.

Ezidore, Triston. [“I Faked Reading in Third Grade. Too Many Black Kids Still Have To”](#). Ed Source, August 4, 2025.

Fensterwald, John. [Newsom Proposes ‘Literacy Road Map’ Based on ‘Science of Reading’; Will Districts Follow or Ignore It?](#) Ed Source, March 13, 2023.

Gallegos, Emma. [“3 Out of 10 California Adults Struggle with Basic Reading”](#). EdSource, March 18, 2024.

Haidt, Jonathan. The Anxious Generation. How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness. Penguin Press. New York, 2024.

Hernandez, Donald. “The Link Between Third Grade Reading Skills and High School Graduation Rates”. Invited Lecture The Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy and The National Institute for Early Education Research. September 20, 2011

Lambert, Diana. [“Newsom Promises Funding to Jump-Start Early Literacy”](#). Ed Source, June 6, 2025.

Lesnick, Joy; Goerge, Robert M.; Smithgall, Cheryl; Gwynne, Julia. [“Reading on Grade Level in Third Grade: How Is It Related to High School Performance and College Enrollment? A Longitudinal Analysis of Third-Grade Students in Chicago in 1996-97 and Their Educational Outcomes.”](#) A Report to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010.

National Center for Education Statistics. [U.S. PIAAC Skills Map: State and county indicators of adult literacy and numeracy](#). U.S. Department of Education, April 2020.

Newman, Susan B.; Quintero, Esther; Reist, Kayla. [Reading Reform Across America: A Survey of State Legislation](#), Shanker Institute, July 2023.

Robson Foster, Kelly et al. On the Same Page. A Primer on the Science of Reading and Its Future for Policymakers, School Leaders, and Advocates. Jan 2024.

Sahlberg, Pasi. Finnish Lessons. What Can the World Learn From Educational Change in Finland? Teachers College Press, Columbia University. New York, 2021.

Strive Together. [Cradle-To-Career Outcomes Playbook: Early Grade Reading](#).

[The Golden State Literacy Plan](#). Governor Gavin Newsom, June 2025.

Van Moort, Marianne, Amy de Bruijne, and Paul van den Broek. “Reading Comprehension in an Online World: Challenges, Opportunities, and Implications for Education”. The Reading Teacher, Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of International Literacy Association, March 2025.