



LITERACY IN NEVADA

ADDRESSING SPANS OF READING LEVELS IN THIRD-GRADE CLASSROOMS THROUGH COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



What you need to know...



Americans struggle with literacy.

It is estimated that **more than half** of American adults read below a sixth-grade level.

In 2024, only **31 percent** of American fourth graders and **35 percent** of twelfth graders were proficient in literacy.

The situation is similar in Nevada.



The education system generally knows how to address the issue.

High-quality preschool programming can have a significant effect on future literacy, though universal preschool is not available in Nevada.

Instruction is much more effective when kids are taught at the leading edge of their current abilities, called their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Doing this either requires individualized instruction or that all the students in a classroom be at the same skill level.



What our study found:

We examined data from ten Nevada third-grade classrooms and found that **more than half** had students spanning at least five grade levels in their literacy abilities.

Put another way, it is as though many teachers have children from first through fifth grade in a single classroom.

Under these circumstances, it is very difficult to target each child's ZPD through traditional instruction.

Competency-based or self-paced learning can help students and teachers navigate the challenge of different skill levels in a classroom.

Low academic proficiency rates remain a national concern, particularly among elementary school children. Reading is the linchpin of learning because it enables all other learning. In response, two general policy approaches have emerged among the states: be sure students can read by the end of grade three and enable children to advance at their own pace.

Experts attribute poor literacy to many factors, including the lack of high-quality, widely available pre-kindergarten education, insufficient language exposure before children begin their schooling, limited access to experienced teachers and literacy specialists, situational or mental health challenges among young students, and chronic absenteeism.

Nevada has committed to improving student achievement by supporting evidence-based teaching practices grounded in the science of reading, emphasizing personalized, competency-based learning, and passing legislation to address literacy needs, such as the Read by Grade 3 program.

To better understand the instructional challenges faced by Nevada's primary-grade teachers, the Guinn Center analyzed literacy proficiency data from 10 third-grade classrooms across the state. We found that individual classrooms have a wide range of student skill sets, making it difficult for teachers to meet all students' needs through a traditional instructional approach.



Going a Little Deeper

1. While nationwide literacy proficiency rates remain below desired benchmarks, states nationwide are pursuing policies that emphasize personalized, competency-based education (CBE). In fact, every U.S. state has at least one competency-based education policy in place, with the most common examples being competency-based graduation requirements and waivers that allow flexibility from education statutes ([KnowledgeWorks, 2025](#)).
2. To support CBE, Nevada created a statewide vision called [The Portrait of a Learner](#), ran a competency-based pilot program, allowed Empowerment Schools to request waivers from district and state statutes, and provided some graduation credit alternatives to distance education students ([KnowledgeWorks, 2025](#)). Additionally, Nevada updated the 2015 state literacy plan, with the new [2025 plan](#) focusing on Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and the science of reading to support literacy proficiency ([NDE, 2025b](#)).
3. Among ten Nevada third-grade classrooms, this study found that most had a range of five or six different grade levels of literacy proficiency among students. Two classes spanned three grades, two spanned four grades, five spanned five grades, and one spanned six grades. While the study found no significant differences between classroom types (e.g., rural versus urban, charter versus public), the sample size was too small to draw definitive conclusions about how classroom types or student demographics might affect the range of literacy proficiency.
4. Nevada has a [Phased Action Plan](#) that includes literacy policy recommendations organized into three phases. The state was recently working on the final step of phase two: creating statewide competencies aligned with the Portrait of a Learner ([NDE and KnowledgeWorks, 2022](#)). The next ten action areas, which will occur during phase three, are detailed in the “Ongoing Nevada Progress” section near the end of this report.



Among ten Nevada third-grade classrooms, this study found that most had a range of five or six different grade levels of literacy proficiency among students.



LITERACY PROFICIENCY IN THE UNITED STATES AND NEVADA

Literacy is the ability to read and write ([Schimke, 2011](#)). Literacy skills include “understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” ([National Center for Education Statistics \[NCES\], n.d.b](#)). In the United States, literacy rates have declined, with a growing share of adults unable to read or write ([NCES, n.d.a](#)). These national patterns offer essential context for Nevada’s literacy challenges.



Literacy is the ability to actively and critically read, write, speak, and listen across all academic content areas and/or career pathways in order to construct meaning and communicate effectively. A literate individual is able to independently and collaboratively function in a global society by using evidence, creativity, questioning, reflection, and problem-solving skills.

NATIONAL LITERACY RATES

In 2017, 19 percent of American adults had a literacy rate at or below level 1 (out of 5 levels, as defined by the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies); that percentage increased to 28 percent in 2023 ([NCES, n.d.a](#)). Various organizations using this data estimate that over half (54 percent) of United States adults read below a sixth-grade level ([Barbara Bush Foundation, n.d.](#); [National Literacy Institute, n.d.](#)). Understanding both adult and K-12 rates is “critical to improve overall literacy policy and drive access to literacy programming” ([The Policy Circle, 2022](#)).

National student literacy rates remain below desired benchmarks and have declined in recent years. The Nation’s Report Card uses scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) administered to fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders to determine proficiency levels, among other metrics. In 2024, only 31 percent of fourth

graders performed at or above the proficient level in literacy, two percentage points lower than in 2022 ([NCES, 2024a](#)). Additionally, only 30 percent of eighth graders and 35 percent of twelfth graders were proficient in 2024 ([NCES, 2024b](#); [NCES, 2024c](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this issue, as average reading scores dropped by five points between 2020 and 2022—the largest decline in reading scores since 1990 ([NCES, 2022](#)).

NEVADA LITERACY RATES

Like many states, Nevada faces persistent challenges in early reading proficiency, and its students mirror the national trends. In 2024, only 30 percent of fourth graders performed at or above proficiency, 29 percent performed at a basic level, and 41 percent (the largest group of students) performed below a basic level of proficiency ([NCES, 2024d](#)).

Performance gaps between student groups are pronounced. For example, Black students scored on average 24 points lower and Hispanic students scored 20 points lower than their white classmates ([NCES, 2024d](#)). Additionally, economically disadvantaged students scored 20 points lower than their financially stable classmates ([NCES, 2024d](#)).

The NAEP scores compare Nevada students to the national baseline. However, the NAEP assessment is not administered to third-grade students. Third-grade literacy is a focus in Nevada due to the statewide Read by Grade 3 law, so the state relies on the annual Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) scores to assess third-grade literacy. In the 2024-25 school year, 45 percent of third-grade students were proficient ([Nevada Department of Education \[NDE\], 2025a](#)). Third through eighth-grade SBAC scores showed notable disparities between students,

as approximately 26 percent of American Indian/Alaskan Native students were proficient compared to almost 58 percent of white students and 71 percent of Asian students. Other groups had especially low proficiency rates: about 15 percent of students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), 14 percent of English Learners, and 26 percent of students in foster care were proficient ([NDE, 2025a](#)).

In addition to the SBAC, school districts in Nevada use Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) and i-Ready test scores to measure proficiency and monitor progress.



In the 2024-25 school year, 45 percent of third-grade students were proficient.

Figure 1. Proficiency by Race, Ethnicity, and Student Group

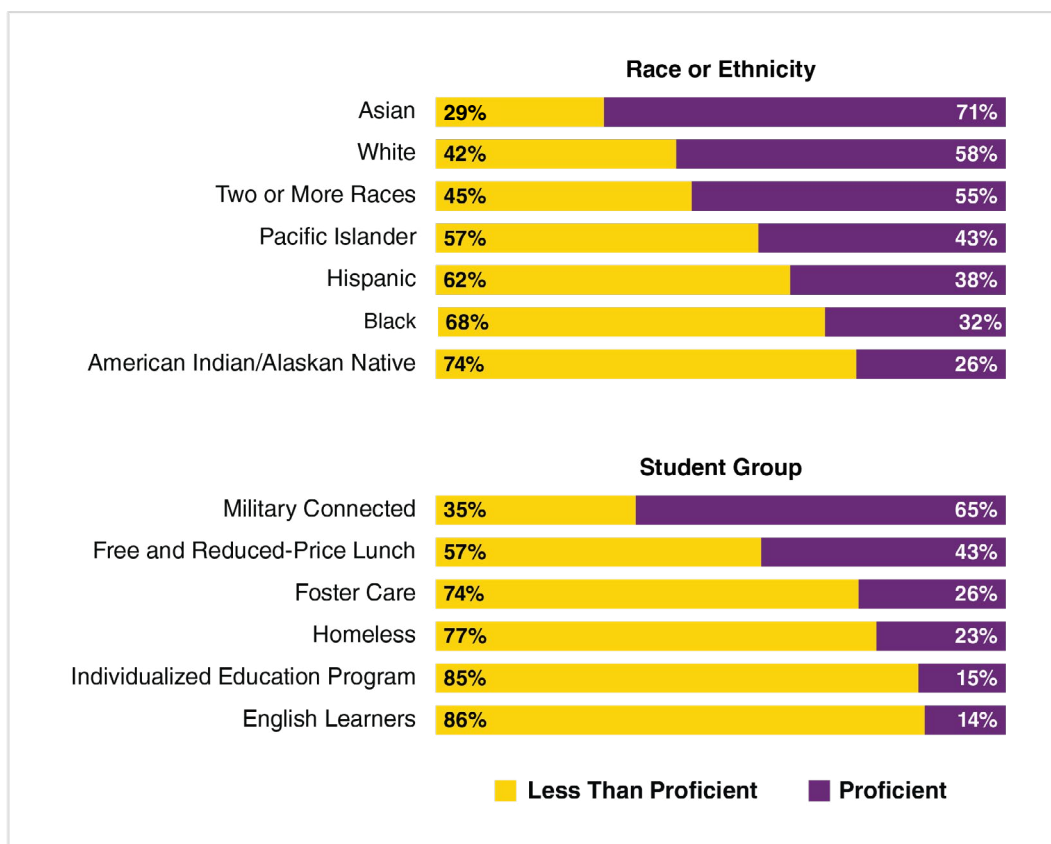
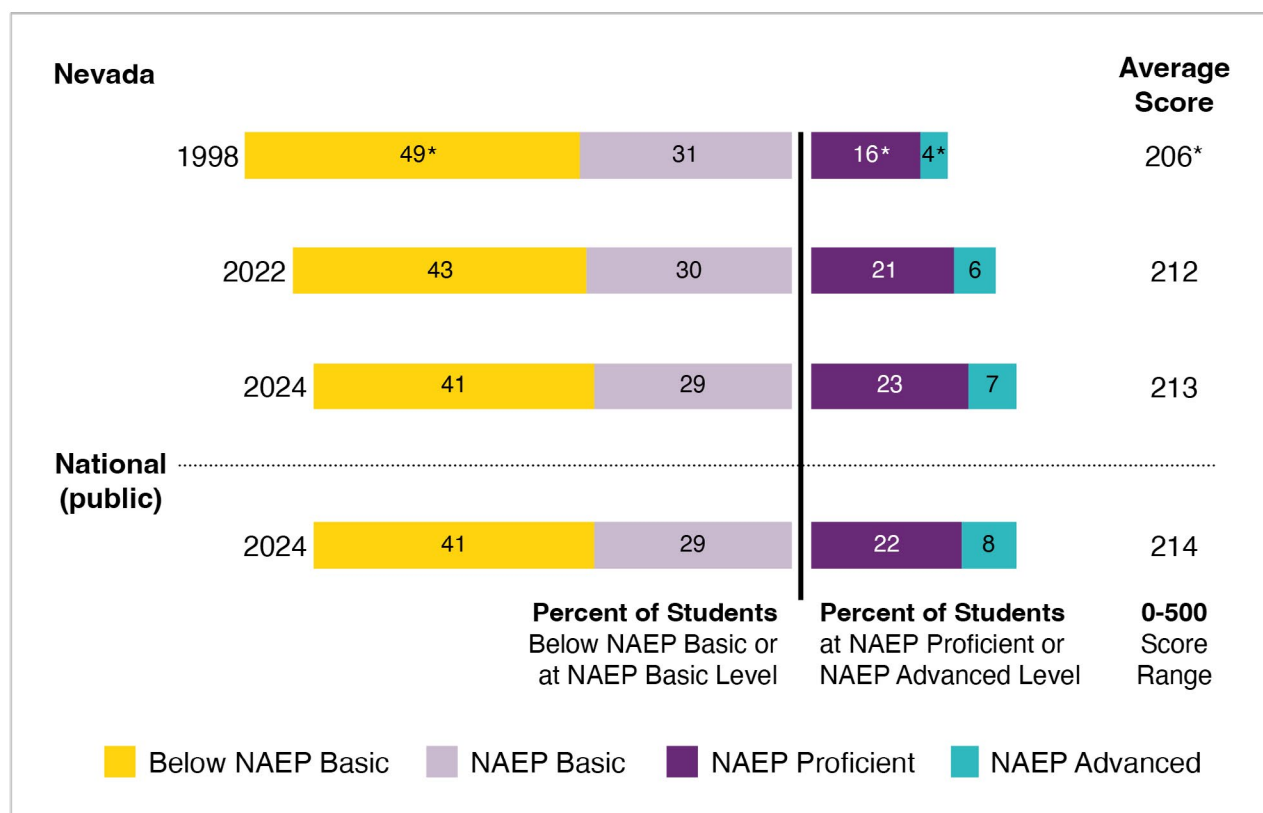


Figure 2. Grade 4 NAEP Achievement Levels, by Percent and Average Scores



*Significantly different ($p < .05$) from the state's results in 2024. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers. Note: NAEP achievement levels are to be used on a trial basis and should be interpreted and used with caution. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2024/pdf/2024220NV4.pdf>.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO LOW LITERACY

Low literacy is influenced by a variety of interconnected factors, creating compounding barriers for individuals and communities. Nationally, literacy rates vary by educational attainment, income, race, and language background ([NCES, n.d.b.](#); [Barbara Bush Foundation, n.d.](#)). Nevada's literacy struggles reflect many of these same dynamics.

One significant factor is the quality of early childhood education. Children who lack access to high-quality preschool programs often enter kindergarten behind their peers in foundational language and literacy skills. These early gaps can persist throughout a student's K-12 schooling if not addressed early. Socioeconomic disparities further intensify this

issue, as families with limited financial resources may face obstacles in accessing educational support, books, and enrichment activities ([Blanchard, 2023](#)). Students with well-educated parents also tend to have higher literacy rates than those with less-educated parents; however, socioeconomic status is likely still a contributing factor, given the high cost of postsecondary education ([NCES, 2010](#)).

Language background is another key factor, and Nevada has a large population of English Learners. For many of these students, literacy development involves simultaneously learning English and mastering academic reading and writing skills, which can present challenges not experienced by native English speakers ([NDE, 2025b](#)).

Low Literacy Contributing Factors



Family Economics
Household Environment
Parent Education
Student Attendance
Student Native Language
Student Transiency



Educator Availability
Educator Experience
Quality of Curriculum and Instruction
Quality of Early Childhood Education



Access to Books and Libraries
Access to Internet Resources



Student Learning Disabilities
Student Mental Health

Access to experienced teachers and literacy specialists also affects literacy outcomes. Schools with high teacher turnover or staffing shortages, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas, often struggle to provide consistent, high-quality literacy instruction. Nevada has faced persistent teacher shortages, particularly in specialized roles such as reading interventionists ([NDE, 2025b](#)).

Additional factors contributing to low literacy rates include mental health challenges, learning disabilities (particularly when left undiagnosed), transiency, and a lack of reading curricula aligned with current literacy recommendations ([Literacy Pittsburgh, n.d.](#); [Diallo, 2020](#)). Students may experience a combination of these factors to varying degrees, and each factor can affect others. Many of these also contribute to chronic absenteeism, which exacerbates poor literacy rates as students miss critical instruction and content and accumulate unlearned skills ([Guinn Center, 2025a](#)).

For more specific information on these contributing factors, please see the Guinn Center’s policy brief titled “[Chronic Absenteeism in Nevada: Part I – Trends, Factors, and Policy Considerations](#)” published July 2025.

Beyond the classroom, community and family environments play a crucial role. Homes with limited access to books, libraries, or broadband internet may offer fewer opportunities for reading and language development outside of school. In 2022, only 19 percent of students who qualified for the National School Lunch Program (also commonly referred to as Free/Reduced Lunch) were at or above a proficient reading level, compared to 46 percent of students who did not qualify ([NCES, 2024a](#)). Additionally, parents with lower literacy levels may feel less confident supporting their children’s reading development, perpetuating intergenerational literacy gaps ([Barbara Bush Foundation, n.d.](#)).

EFFECTS OF LOW LITERACY

Poor literacy is detrimental to students' academic and overall well-being during school and throughout their adult lives. A recent opinion piece in *The Nevada Independent* notes that “students who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school and often have limited economic mobility as a result” ([Hughes, 2025](#)). In fact, third-grade reading proficiency is often the “make-or-break benchmark,” as students entering fourth grade are expected to read to learn other subjects. Unprepared students will struggle as “up to half of the printed fourth-grade curriculum is incomprehensible to students who read below that grade level,” and three-fourths of students who are poor readers in third grade will be poor readers in high school ([Fiester and Smith, 2010](#)). While these are major concerns for all students, Black and Hispanic students who are not reading by third grade are twice as likely to drop out of high school compared to their white classmates ([Hernández, 2011](#)).



Communities with lower literacy rates may experience broader social and economic impacts, including higher poverty rates and limited civic participation ([Regis College, 2021](#)). For Nevada, low literacy rates can influence workforce development and economic competitiveness, as businesses increasingly require employees with strong communication and problem-solving skills.



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Additionally, low literacy can have long-term social impacts, including intergenerational cycles of low educational attainment, reduced health literacy, and greater reliance on social services ([Barbara Bush Foundation, n.d.](#)). Juvenile delinquency is linked to poor literacy, as most incarcerated youth read below grade level, with estimates between 83 and 98 percent ([Katsiyannis et al., 2008](#)). Addressing these challenges requires coordinated strategies across early education, K–12 systems, workforce development, and community initiatives.



NEVADA'S FURTHER CHALLENGE: VARIANCE IN STUDENT SKILLS IN INDIVIDUAL CLASSROOMS

We wanted to better understand the specific challenges faced by Nevada teachers who are struggling to help their students achieve literacy proficiency before they move on to fourth grade. We wondered to what extent instruction in a student's Zone of Proximal Development is difficult to deliver because the children in a given classroom are operating in vastly different developmental zones.

To this end, our study aimed to:

1. Document the distribution of literacy proficiency rates within Nevada third-grade classrooms;
2. Quantify the range of achievement levels present within single classrooms; and
3. Provide evidence to guide educators and policymakers in identifying best practices for supporting students across diverse literacy levels.

DATA SOURCES

For this study, the data used include MAP Growth or i-Ready scores from 10 third-grade classrooms across the state. The sample consists of six traditional public classrooms (five urban and one rural) and four charter classrooms (two urban and two rural). There is a significant mix of income levels, geographic areas, and student demographics among the classrooms studied.



What is i-Ready?

The i-Ready is a computer-adaptive assessment usually given to students three times during the school year. The scores provide information on what grade-level standards the student meets, as well as a percentile ranking compared to the national average of students in the same grade assessed at the same time. The i-Ready “prescribes actionable next steps” for each student based on their results.

What is MAP?

MAP tests are also computer-adaptive assessments administered up to three times each school year. MAP data provides teachers and education leaders with big-picture trends, progress, and areas of growth.

While MAP is “effective at measuring performance relative to peers, it does not diagnose specific skill gaps or provide direct instructional support” (Davis, 2025).

PROCEDURE

We first completed an Institutional Review Board protocol and obtained full clearance to begin collecting data. Our team worked with school districts before contacting individual principals to obtain research permission where needed. We sent emails to principals at 14 elementary schools across the state explaining the purpose of the study and requesting either i-Ready or MAP data from one randomly selected third-grade class at each school. Principals were asked to ensure the report was anonymized and contained no identifying information before sending the records. To the extent practicable, we converted the RIT (Rasch Unit) scores from the MAP data to grade-level proficiency levels. The MAP data uses grade-level means rather than benchmarks, so it is likely that our data slightly underestimates the number of proficient students.

DATA ANALYSIS

After receiving the MAP and i-Ready results for each class, we began our analysis by compiling data from each school into tables and creating charts that showed the relationship between grade level and literacy proficiency. These visuals enabled analysis of proficiency levels within a single classroom and evaluation of patterns across school types.

After creating grade-level data points for 10 classrooms across the state, the grade distributions for reading proficiency are shown below.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of students in each third-grade classroom we sampled at reading levels K-5. Each grade has a dedicated color to show the varying degrees of proficiency.

Figure 3. Literacy Grade Spans in Sampled Nevada Third-Grade Classrooms

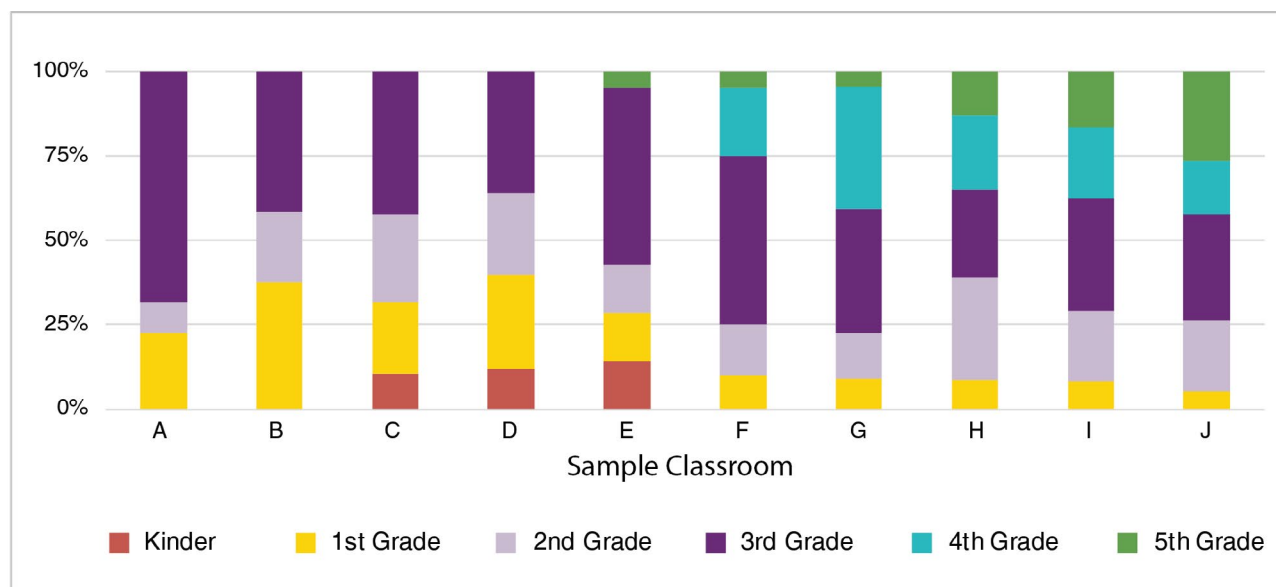


Figure 4 illustrates the number of classrooms with reading spans ranging from three grade levels to six grade levels. From our sample, we found that half of the third-grade classes studied had a range of five grade levels of literacy proficiency. Two classes spanned three grades, two spanned four grades, five spanned five grades, and one spanned six grades.

The sample size was not large enough to detect significant differences in classroom demographics (e.g., urban/rural or public/charter) that could explain the wide variation in proficiency. It would be interesting to expand this research across the state to explore whether any significant differences exist.

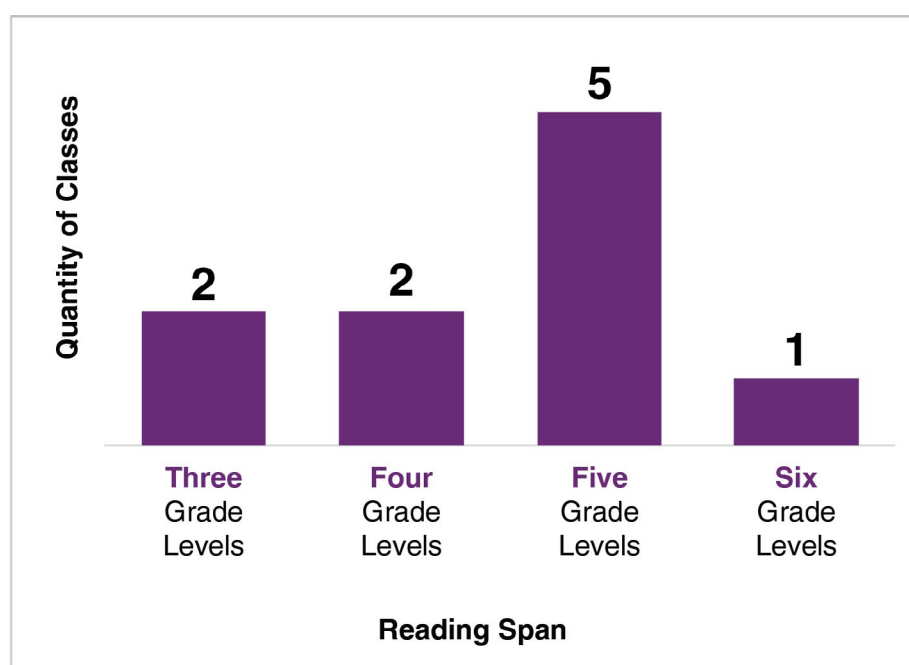
The variation in student ability is significant. The classroom with the lowest number of literacy proficiency levels had students on three different reading levels (first, second, and third grade). The classroom with the greatest variation had students reading at levels from kindergarten to fifth grade. In one classroom, only 26 percent of

the students read at a third-grade level, meaning approximately three-fourths of the class read above or below the instructional content.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could provide a deeper understanding of the needs of teachers and students across the state. For example, the research in this report could be expanded to a statewide sample, enabling teachers, policymakers, and stakeholders to better understand the range of grade-level proficiency faced by Nevada's teachers. A larger sample may also enable identification of patterns and factors contributing to the proficiency ranges. Future research could also focus on soliciting teachers' perspectives on possible data gaps, opportunities for improvement, the effects of test timing and reporting, and how well assessment data equips them to individualize instruction to meet student needs. Furthermore, future research could investigate how teachers are or can effectively utilize testing data in the classroom. This information may also support Nevada's pursuit of competency-based education to support academic advancement.

Figure 4. Number of Sampled Classes with Various Grade Spans



NEVADA'S LITERACY INTERVENTION EFFORTS

It is helpful to understand Nevada's early literacy challenges in the context of its efforts to address them. For at least a decade, the state has committed significant funding and programming for literacy in the primary grades. Below is an overview of the Read by Grade 3 initiative, from its initial enactment in 2015 through subsequent legislative revisions, followed by an overview of the updated [Nevada State Literacy Plan](#). Together, these efforts demonstrate how state law and appropriations have supported the public education system to bolster early literacy instruction, intervention, and accountability.

READ BY GRADE 3

2015

Reading is the foundational skill that enables a child to learn all other subjects, and research shows that students who cannot read at grade level by third grade have a substantially lower chance of graduating from high school. Thus, many states have pursued policies to prioritize reading in grades K-3. In 2015, Nevada passed [Senate Bill 391](#), which includes the "Read by Grade 3" (RBG3) program and "establishes a statewide comprehensive system of early reading instruction and intervention aimed at accelerating the reading growth of students reading below grade level in kindergarten through third grade" ([NDE, n.d.a](#)). This bill also introduced a competitive grant system to support certain literacy programs and required school districts to:

- Create local literacy plans;
- Designate a learning strategist at each elementary school;
- Require some teachers to complete professional development focused on literacy;
- Pursue certain interventions for K-3 students who are not proficient; and
- Retain any third-grade student who is not proficient ([NDE, 2020](#)).



2019

In 2019, [Assembly Bill 289](#) made significant changes to the RBG3 program, including:

- Replacing the competitive grant process with non-competitive grants while requiring all public elementary schools to implement RBG3;
- Expanding the scope of targeted interventions to all grade levels (instead of only K-3); and
- Removing the mandatory third-grade retention requirement ([NDE, 2020](#)).

Nevada never had the chance to fully realize the effects of the RBG3 expansion, as the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools during its first year of implementation, causing significant educational disruptions ([NDE, 2020](#)). The RBG3 funding for site-level literacy specialists was cut in 2020 as one of many reductions made during the 2020 special session to address the major economic impacts of COVID-19 ([NDE, 2020](#)).

2023

The RBG3 program further evolved in 2023 with the passage of [Assembly Bill 400](#). Prominent changes included:

- Reinstating the retention requirement (to begin in 2028) but allowing for “good-cause exemptions,” to include, for example: (1) acceptable proficiency on an alternate assessment or portfolio; (2) English Learners who have at least two years of English as a second language instruction; and (3) students with IEPs who have received intensive reading support for at least two years and were previously retained in kindergarten, first, second, or third grade;
- Allowing a student who has been retained in third grade to advance to fourth grade at any point in the school year if they reach literacy proficiency;
- Requiring public schools to offer summer school or other “transitional settings” for students who do not receive a passing literacy score; and
- Creating the Early Childhood Literacy and Readiness Account, which allocated \$140 million between 2023-25 for early reading programs ([Davis, 2023](#)).



2025

Most recently, adjustments to the RBG3 program were made in [Senate Bill 460](#) of the 2025 Legislative Session. This omnibus bill allows alternative assessments to determine literacy, giving districts “more flexibility to choose tools that align with their local literacy strategies and provide timely, actionable data to inform instruction and help teachers adjust their approach” ([Hughes, 2025](#)). This flexibility is reflected in school districts across the state through the use of the i-Ready assessment platform.

Other elements of SB 460 will further Nevada’s goal of literacy proficiency by third grade. The bill requires K-3 educators to complete evidence-based literacy skills training and educators, administrators, and paraprofessionals serving K-3 students to complete professional development training in the [science of reading](#) ([Senate Bill 460, 2025](#)). The bill also expands grant eligibility for pre-K and early childhood literacy and readiness programs, providing more opportunities and access to literacy for young students ([Guinn Center, 2025b](#)).



NEVADA STATE LITERACY PLAN

In 2025, the Nevada Department of Education released an updated [Nevada State Literacy Plan](#) (NSLP) to inform, support, and improve literacy strategies in tandem with current legislation. The 2025 NSLP does not divide recommendations by grade level and instead utilizes a vertical alignment approach, ensuring that educators feel confident in providing individualized support for each student's unique needs. Additionally, the 2025 NSLP revises the 2015 version by focusing on MTSS, the science of learning, and adolescent literacy, whereas the 2015 plan emphasized adult literacy ([NDE, 2025b](#)).

The 2025 NSLP includes three major goals to accomplish by 2030:

- Improve Nevada's overall English Language Arts (ELA) K-2 student proficiency on the spring semester administration of the benchmark assessments (with more specific goals to be determined after the assessment tools have been updated);
- Improve ELA proficiency to at least 60 percent of grade 3-8 students at or above proficient on the Smarter Balanced Assessment; and
- Improve ACT reading scores such that 40 percent of students achieve proficiency ([NDE, 2025b](#)).

To achieve these goals, the NSLP also highlights six priority areas for improvement: Tier 1 Instruction, Assessment, MTSS, Leadership, Professional Learning, and Family and Community Engagement ([NDE, 2025b](#)). Each priority area has a list of key practices and actions for implementation. The following includes examples from each priority area.

Tier 1 Instruction

The MTSS framework consists of three tiers, or levels, of interventions. The most intensive interventions, in Tier 3, are applied to the smallest number of students who need the most support. Tier 2 interventions are applied to approximately half of the student body, and Tier 1 interventions are implemented for the entire student population (whether in a class, school, district, or state setting). The NSLP highlights the need for “equity-oriented, comprehensive, and effective Tier 1 literacy instruction” to support all Nevada students. Every day, each student in the classroom deserves high-quality curricula and instruction from knowledgeable teachers. Examples of key practices from the NSLP include “center all students as expert language learners” and “provide rich oral language experiences” ([NDE, 2025b](#)).

Assessment

Literacy assessments are used to identify, support, and monitor students ([NDE, 2025b](#)). The NSLP focuses on administering literacy assessments that align with specific goals and recognizes that “literacy assessment is a social process, not a technical activity” ([National Council of Teachers of English, 2018](#)). For example, universal screenings, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring, and summative assessments each serve distinct purposes. Yet, all these assessments give educators and legislators the data they need to make well-informed instructional and policy decisions to best support student learning. Examples of key practices from the NSLP include “ensuring inclusive and equitable assessment practices” and “building capacity in assessment literacy” ([NDE, 2025b](#)).

Multi-Tiered System of Supports

In addition to examining the need to improve Tier 1 literacy instruction specifically, the NSLP also emphasizes the need for an effective literacy-focused MTSS framework at every educational level. This framework promotes academic success by “personalizing learning opportunities to meet the specific pedagogical and cultural needs of students while maintaining rigorous, common expectations for all students.” The tiered system ensures that each student receives the instruction and additional support appropriate to their needs. Examples of key practices from the NSLP include “collaboration,” “progress monitoring,” and “data-based decision making” ([NDE, 2025b](#)). For those interested in more information on MTSS or school-based behavioral health, the Guinn Center studied the topic in depth in 2025 and offered specific public policy measures for consideration ([Guinn Center, 2025c](#)).

Leadership

Literacy leaders organize and manage personnel teams and other resources to improve literacy rates in their schools and districts. These leaders support other educators and faculty members to stay informed about current literacy research and “foster a culture of continuous professional development and growth.” Students rely on their support and guidance to understand how literacy is linked to college preparedness and career readiness. Literacy leaders must be particularly attuned to the challenges that accompany literacy initiatives, as students often face significant gaps between their expected and actual proficiency levels. Examples of key practices from the NSLP include “develop talent” and “shift culture” ([NDE, 2025b](#)).



Professional Development

Ongoing professional development ensures educators continuously improve their pedagogy and gain new skills to support their students. As noted in the NSLP, “well-designed and well-implemented professional development should be regarded as a vital element of a comprehensive teaching and learning system that equips students with the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for success in the 21st century.” The NSLP discusses the importance of differentiating literacy professional development by role, so that administrators, teachers, and literacy leaders all feel confident in their responsibilities to support students’ reading and writing. Improving literacy rates depends on “equipping educators with knowledge of the most research-based instruction and providing them with opportunities for integrating that knowledge into their practice.” With the passage of SB 460 in 2025, K-3 educators will also be required to complete training on the science of reading. Examples of key practices from the NSLP include “fostering active learning” and “engaging in reflection and feedback cycles” ([NDE, 2025b](#)).



“Acknowledging and embracing the complementary expertise of families and educators forms the basis for a powerful, intentional, strategic collaboration.”
([Springboard Collaborative, n.d.](#)).

Family and Community Engagement

The Nevada Department of Education and the NSLP define family engagement as “a shared responsibility between schools, families, and communities where all receive equitable access to tools and supports needed to successfully work together toward the development of children and youth for college, career, and lifelong learning.” The NSLP emphasizes research that shows students “do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more” when schools, families, and communities work together to address educational challenges and barriers ([NDE, 2025b](#)). While family and community engagement are crucial for increasing literacy rates, research also shows that non-school family engagement is associated with higher graduation rates ([Kantova, 2024](#)). Examples of key practices from the NSLP include “communicating effectively” and “sharing power (involvement vs. engagement)” ([NDE, 2025b](#)).



THE RESEARCH UNDERPINNING NEVADA'S LITERACY STRATEGIES

The Science of Reading

The [science of reading](#) refers to the body of scientific knowledge describing the most effective methods to teach and support literacy ([Petscher et al., 2020](#)). It is interdisciplinary and integrates the expertise of cognitive and developmental psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, and many other fields. It is not a particular curriculum or program; instead, it refers to the collective evidence that helps us “understand how a student develops into a skillful reader” ([The Reading League, 2022](#)). This understanding leads to reading instruction and support that results not only in students who know how to read, but also in students who “relish text, dive into literate activity with passion, and value themselves as readers” ([Aukerman and Chambers Schuldts, 2021](#)).

One of the most common models referenced in literacy research is [The Simple View of Reading](#). This model explains that reading comprehension is the product of two vital elements, word recognition and language comprehension ([Gough and Tunmer, 1986](#)). Both skills are essential to literacy, and a deficit in either will negatively impact reading comprehension. Word recognition includes phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition. Language comprehension includes background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge ([The Reading League, 2022](#)). The Simple View of Reading does not claim learning to read is a simple process; rather, it suggests that skilled reading can be broken into these two elements ([Hoover and Gough, 1990](#)). Furthermore, students generally fall into one of four quadrants based on their strengths and weaknesses, as shown in Figure 5.

Educators and school leaders can better support literacy when they understand which specific skills their students lack, contributing to poor

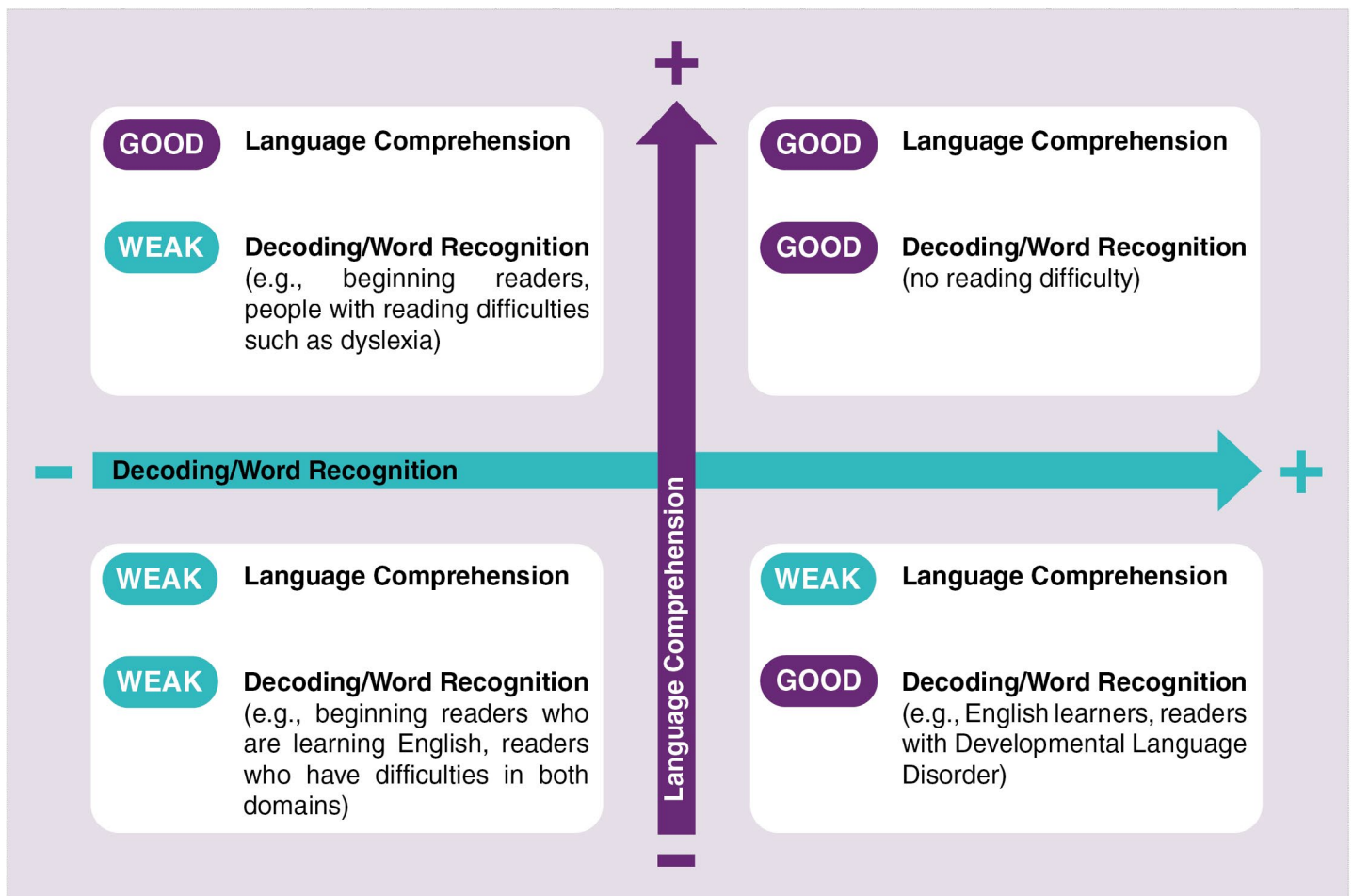
reading comprehension ([Farrell et al., n.d.](#)). Examples of classroom practices aligned with the science of reading include phonics instruction to foster early decoding, reading diverse texts to expand vocabulary, and encouraging students to make personal connections to what they read ([Strobel Education, 2023](#)).



“A student with strong decoding and comprehension skills is more likely to succeed academically, gain confidence, and develop a lifelong love for reading. The Simple View of Reading model, therefore, isn’t just about improving literacy – it’s about empowering students to reach their full potential”
([Strobel Education, 2023](#)).



Figure 5. The Simple View of Reading: Word Recognition and Language Comprehension



<https://www.thereadingleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Science-of-Reading-eBook-2022.pdf>

To ensure Nevada educators feel confident in their knowledge and ability to support student literacy, the NSLP highlights the following eight components related to the science of reading:

Evidence-Based Instruction – Relying on scientific research about effective reading instruction for all grade levels and backgrounds.

Explicit and Systematic Instruction – Using “clear, unambiguous instruction” that builds on past skills in a way that keeps students motivated to learn.

Early Intervention and the Use of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports – Dividing reading interventions into appropriate tiers so each student receives the type and amount of support relevant to their needs.

Data-Driven Decision Making – Basing instructional decisions on assessment data, monitoring progress, and adjusting as needed to guarantee students receive tailored support.

Literacy Specialists – Utilizing the expertise of literacy specialists who guide and support educators in their efforts to use evidence-based practices in their classrooms.

Professional Development – Providing regular training for continual learning, ensuring that Nevada educators stay up to date on effective literacy teaching methods.

Cultural Responsiveness – Combining the science of reading strategies with the diverse needs of each student based on their cultural experiences to enhance literacy outcomes.

Family and Community Engagement – Leveraging families’ insights and reinforcing reading practices at home.

Nevada is committed to using evidence-based literacy practices and improving instructional consistency to increase literacy across the state ([NDE, 2025b](#)).

The Need For Individualized Instruction

A 2018 survey found that 94 percent of students aspired to attend college, and 70 percent of high schoolers have career goals that require at least a college degree. And although students spend most of their time—88 percent, according to [The New Teacher Project \(TNTN\) study](#)—working on class-related activities and earning passing grades, they only showed mastery of grade-level standards 17 percent of the time because of how many assignments failed to give students the chance to practice grade-level mastery. In fact, TNTN’s study found that “the average top-quartile classroom typically used grade-appropriate assignments only about 50 percent of the time” ([TNTN, 2018](#)). This leads to what is known as the opportunity myth: “the false promise that if students do what they are asked in school, they will be set up for success. And that if they don’t succeed, they must have done something to blow their chance” ([TNTN, n.d.](#)).

To address this opportunity myth and improve college success, students must have access to four key resources: “grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers who hold high expectations” ([TNTN, 2018](#)). These resources are directly connected to literacy. Students need literacy instruction, assignments, and assessments that align with grade-level standards; access to additional interventions if they fall behind; and teachers and schools that expect them to meet their benchmarks. Strengthening literacy skills is essential to ensuring Nevada students are capable and confident as they work toward their academic and career aspirations.



“In this personalized, competency-based learning system, each student gets what they need to reach their full potential and master competencies through flexible pathways and personalized learning supports - ensuring each learner graduates ready for what's next”
([NDE, n.d.b](#)).

To further support student success, Nevada has increasingly focused on a competency-based education approach. [Assembly Bill 110](#), enacted in 2017, defines CBE as “a system of instruction by which a pupil advances to a higher level of learning when the pupil demonstrates mastery of a concept or skill, regardless of the time, place, or pace at which the pupil progresses.” This bill also established the Competency-Based Education Network and Pilot Program, comprising principals, teachers, parents, and other education leaders from both schools participating in and not participating in a CBE pilot program. This Network is tasked with studying the tools, approaches, and strategies that provide CBE ([NDE, 2022](#)). However, local districts, not state mandates, are the key to successful CBE implementation ([Stanford, 2023](#)). Schools across Nevada are offering accelerated classes, competency-based learning units, and customizable online education platforms to match individual student learning and help students master the goals of the [Nevada Portrait of a Learner Project](#) ([Guinn Center, 2024](#)).

For more information on competency-based learning, please see the Guinn Center’s policy brief, [“Show What You Know: An Overview of Competency-Based Education Practices & Key Policy Implications”](#) (2024).

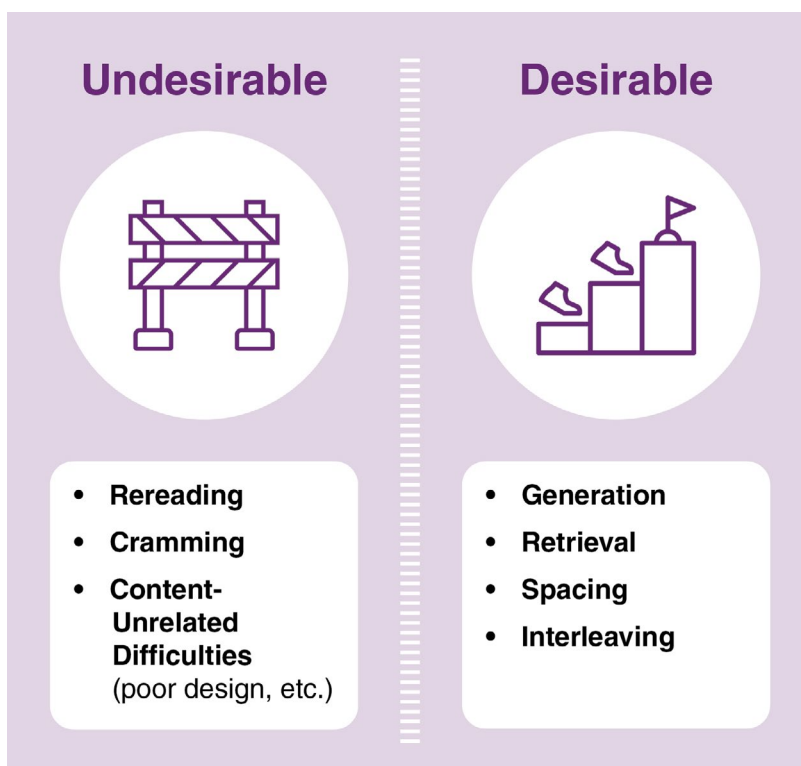
Addressing literacy, even with CBE, is particularly challenging given each student's unique instructional needs. One study estimated that within third-grade classes, there was a span of nine grade levels of proficiency ([Firmender et al., 2012](#)). Teachers are given the daunting task of creating engaging lesson plans for students across a wide range of achievement gaps. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a well-established theory in educational psychology that describes how students learn. Each student has a level, or “zone,” of learning they can accomplish independently. To progress, students need to be challenged and supported by teachers and peers until they can accomplish that level on their own. This cyclical process continues throughout a lifetime. Trying to teach a third grader extensive calculus is a dramatic example of teaching beyond the student’s ZPD ([Shabani et al., 2010](#)).

Educators who want to support student literacy must be able to recognize each student’s ZPD, adapt lesson plans for individual needs, and improve overall proficiency—a challenging and often overwhelming process. But the advent of artificial intelligence technology “provides a new possibility to solve this problem. Technology, with its powerful data processing, learning analysis, and intelligent recommendation capabilities, can help students and teachers identify ZPD more accurately and provide more precise guidance for teaching” ([Wang, 2024](#)).

Teaching within a student’s ZPD enhances learning because enduring knowledge is developed when students must work through challenges to achieve mastery. While “information that comes easily is usually the first to fade,” learning becomes embedded in long-term memory when there is deliberate effort to make meaningful connections to the content. This phenomenon is referred to as the “paradox of learning,” as easier, more comfortable learning fades faster, while more intellectually intense learning endures. Like a student’s ZPD, students thrive when working through desirable difficulties (see Figure 6). “Desirable difficulties are learning conditions that create short-term challenges while enhancing long-term retention and transfer” (Main, 2025). Improving literacy should include identifying a student’s current proficiency level and then crafting personalized, competency-based learning strategies that push students through desirable difficulties.

This critical conversation around ZPD and literacy requires nuance, as students must be exposed to grade-level texts, regardless of their current reading ability, to improve overall literacy rates. Spending too much time on material below the grade level and remediation strategies has put students even further behind. At the same time, accelerated learning can bridge the gap between unfinished learning and grade-level proficiency. “Learning acceleration means ensuring that students consistently read, write about, and discuss grade-level texts most of the time—while sometimes using more accessible texts to build the knowledge and vocabulary they might need to access the grade-level texts” (TNTP, 2022). Balancing grade-level texts with accessible texts within each student’s ZPD will support student success.

Figure 6. Desirable Difficulties



Without this level of appropriate challenge, students may become bored, restless, stressed, or overwhelmed, and lose motivation in class. The relationship between poor academic performance and behavioral disruptions in class is reciprocal—poor academic performance can trigger disruptive behaviors if the student is bored or frustrated, and disruptive behavior can lead to worse educational outcomes when the behaviors interfere with the student’s ability to engage in class meaningfully ([Chen et al., 2022](#)). Competency-based education and desirable difficulties can do more than improve test scores and proficiency rates; they can also positively impact students' emotional and mental well-being.



More About Competency-Based Education

Research shows that when students receive classroom instruction well below their skill level, they can become bored. And, if the instruction is far beyond their skills, students can become frustrated or lost. Imagine a sixth grader attending a second-grade class, or vice versa. This scenario essentially plays out every day in classrooms across Nevada, where students in a single class have a wide range of skill levels.

In response to this challenge, research and experience suggest that CBE is an effective solution. States across the country, including Nevada, have implemented various policies to promote personalized learning through CBE, allowing individual students to advance at their own pace.

Examples of CBE strategies include:

Learning Frameworks: Like Nevada’s “Portrait of a Learner,” Utah developed a learner profile called “Portrait of a Graduate.” Utah has also

assembled [Portrait of a Graduate Competencies](#) with detailed expectations, which include “Civic, Financial and Economic Literacy,” “Honesty, Integrity and Responsibility,” “Lifelong Learning and Personal Growth,” “Academic Mastery,” and others. Each competency has a list of specific learning outcomes organized by grade-level spans. This approach is supported by research that shows learning frameworks should “express interrelated knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are relevant, measurable, and transferable and that can be applied throughout a learner’s lifetime.”

Graduation Requirements: Only nine states in the country have high school graduation requirements that are directly related to the competencies developed in the state’s learner profile. Colorado’s [Graduation Guidelines](#) are an example of graduation requirements that are “designed to help students build and articulate in-demand skills that meet business, industry, and higher education standards.”

Competency-Based Credits: Forty-five states have policies that allow students to earn credits by demonstrating competency. This flexibility includes “methods such as testing, peer evaluations, writing samples, reports, or portfolios” (Utah) and giving “school district boards the authority to develop their own unique graduation requirements” (Colorado). Nevada only provides alternative options for earning credit in distance education programs.

Instructional Time: Instead of limiting instructional time to that spent in the classroom, Arizona defines “instructional time” as any of the following:

- Direct instruction;
- Project-based learning;
- Independent learning; or
- Mastery-based learning, which may be delivered in a blended classroom serving multiple grade levels or providing blended grade-level content.

Waivers: Most states, including Nevada, offer a waiver or exemption that allows schools to override statutory requirements to facilitate their own “innovative and competency-based education approaches.” Nevada law creates Empowerment Schools “which allows a public school to operate under a separate empowerment plan” ([KnowledgeWorks, 2025](#)).

Evaluating how CBE can be used to improve literacy does not necessitate rearranging the recommended order of phonics instruction or other evidence-based literacy teaching strategies. However, offering CBE helps students become more engaged in their language learning because instruction aligns with their zone of proximal development. The use of CBE also helps teachers be more effective by ensuring that the students in front of them have a similar skill level.



ONGOING NEVADA PROGRESS

In 2020, the Nevada Department of Education collaborated with KnowledgeWorks to plan for the future of Nevada K-12 education. After conducting a [State Opportunity Analysis](#), the [Nevada Phased Action Plan](#) was published in 2022. Unlike the Nevada State Literacy Plan, this action plan does not explicitly target literacy; instead, it seeks to improve overall personalized, competency-based education. The plan includes three phases, each with a list of action areas that include a description, a list of responsible individuals, specific tasks, and measures of success. Phase one addresses capacity building, phase two covers foundational structures, and phase three navigates integration. As of late 2025, Nevada was at step three of phase two, with some districts further along and beginning to implement action areas from phase three.

Once Nevada has developed statewide competencies that align with the [Portrait of a Learner](#), it will be ready to begin phase three. This phase focuses on “how to integrate the work conducted on the profile and Portrait of a Learner into other related statewide systems and structures” ([NDE and KnowledgeWorks, 2022](#)). Phase three includes the following ten action areas to be completed concurrently, whereas phases one and two were intended to be completed sequentially:

Communications: Develop a communications plan to further disseminate the work of the statewide network from phases one and two

- Action area one focuses on creating district-level communication plans, with specific plans for each intended audience group. The objective is to provide an update on the work already accomplished and share “early wins and what a successful personalized, competency-based learning model looks like in practice.”

Statewide Systems and Structures: Improve alignment and integration of statewide student and family support structures within the state’s new Portrait of a Learner and competencies

- Action area two focuses on assembling a team to conduct a review of existing programs that support student success, integrate those programs into personalized, competency-based learning approaches, develop resources to help families use the Portrait of a Learner, and develop changes to state statute as needed.

Statewide Systems and Structures: Redefine seat time and attendance policies

- Action area three focuses on two specific tasks: (1) creating a group responsible for developing changes to current state seat time and attendance statutes; and (2) looking for additional policy or statutory changes to support personalized, competency-based learning.

Educator Development: Improve professional learning opportunities related to personalized, competency-based learning instruction for educators

- Action area four focuses on assembling a team tasked with identifying strategies to improve professional development and other training opportunities for teachers in understanding personalized, competency-based learning; developing an assessment tool that will help districts and schools determine the current state of their professional development and ways to improve; and exploring funding opportunities to support this training.

Educator Development: Build out the spaces and resources for educator professional development related to the Portrait of a Learner and competencies

- Action area five focuses on developing ways to ensure teachers have the time and ability to participate in this new professional development training and are aware of these opportunities by creating a visual aid or catalog.

Educator Development: Ensure assessment literacy is included in a new suite of professional learning afforded to educators

- Action area six focuses on developing and creating teacher professional development opportunities to build their assessment and data literacy skills, “so that students may demonstrate their learning in more authentic and experiential ways.”

Educator Recruitment and Retention: Grow the number of qualified teachers for college and career-oriented courses to expand student opportunities

- Action area seven focuses on analyzing the deficiencies in college and career-readiness courses across the state, exploring ways to increase the number of qualified teachers in Nevada, testing these strategies, and evaluating whether legislative action is needed to support this goal.

Data/School Performance: Integrate personalized, competency-based learning strategies more fully into the school-performance planning (SPP) process

- Action area eight focuses on analyzing current school-performance planning processes, studying best practices (from Nevada and other state models) for implementing personalized, competency-based learning into SPP, and developing a variety of guidance and support

structures to help schools adopt, implement, and track competency-based learning initiatives.

Data/School Performance: Develop new data dashboards to communicate statewide information

- Action area nine focuses on creating “a unified reporting system that includes space for student portfolios and school performance dashboards” by assembling a task force to explore alternative systems, engaging with the public to receive feedback, and potentially launching a pilot program.

Data/School Performance: Integrate school climate surveys into the state’s school performance framework

- Action area 10 focuses on integrating school climate survey results into Nevada’s school performance framework and developing strategies to promote public awareness of the surveys, bolstering engagement while safeguarding data privacy and security ([NDE and KnowledgeWorks, 2022](#)).



CONCLUSION

Our nation has been struggling with literacy instruction for a long time, given the low literacy rates among American adults. Nevada is taking action to address this issue through policy changes and significant investments. However, teachers in Nevada face many challenges in improving student literacy due to the wide range of student skill levels within each classroom. Instructional decisions can be difficult, as each teacher grapples with how to ensure that individual students receive the rigorous, targeted education they need.

Our research shows that teachers could be better supported in their work through a comprehensive system of competency-based education, where every student is taught in a setting with peers who have a similar skill level in the subject being taught. Thus, while continuing its work under the Nevada State Literacy Plan, there is evidence that the objectives of the Nevada Phased Action Plan, which emphasize CBE, will be essential to making the state's teachers more effective in their literacy work.

Although not explored in this paper, a large body of research shows that skill gaps between students in the primary grades can be reduced or eliminated through high-quality, universal preschool. The lack of such programming in Nevada is likely a significant cause of the skill differences observed in our study of third-grade classrooms. For more on this topic, please see our [comprehensive 2024 report on Early Childhood Systems](#).



Although not explored in this paper, a large body of research shows that skill gaps between students in the primary grades can be reduced or eliminated through high-quality, universal preschool.

Future research on early literacy and skills gaps could expand its sample statewide and explore teacher perspectives in identifying patterns in student proficiency, improving assessment practices, and using testing data to individualize instruction. These insights would strengthen Nevada's efforts to support CBE and improve student literacy.



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ABOUT THE GUINN CENTER

The Kenny Guinn Center for Policy Priorities is a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy research center addressing key challenges faced by policymakers and all Nevadans.

Our staff researchers, together with academic partners and independent experts across the state, tackle policy issues that range from taxation to water use, healthcare to education, and everything in between. We identify and analyze the complex problems we face as a state and inform decision-makers about actionable, data-driven, and effective policy solutions.

We invite you to join us in creating a brighter future for the Silver State by supporting our mission, signing up for our newsletter, or getting in contact.

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