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Structured Literacy Implementation

Historically, literacy has been defined as the ability to read and write. Today, more expanded definitions are commonly used with literacy conceptualized as not only reading and writing, but also listening, speaking, and the ability to both evaluate and communicate through a wide range of sources. These more comprehensive definitions of literacy, however, are not possible without an early foundation in reading and comprehension skills at the start of a child’s academic education.

Without a strong foundation in literacy skills, children often fall behind in their academic journey. [Research](#) shows more than 85 percent of school curriculums are delivered by reading, making it a crucial skill in furthering a child’s learning. Low literacy rates also have long-term consequences. Longstanding research has found children who are not proficient in reading are four times more likely to drop out of high school. Consequences also extend into adulthood. There are estimated to be [130 million adults](#) in the U.S. with low literacy skills—meaning more than half (54 percent) of Americans between the ages of 16 and 74 read below the equivalent of a sixth grade reading level. Low literacy deeply impacts adult outcomes because literacy proficiency is correlated with several important domains including health, income, and employment.

Early skill development in literacy matters. In 2019, New Mexico passed a state law requiring several key changes in how the state provides literacy instruction including expansion of professional development, student screening, and development of literacy plans at the school district and charter school level. In addition, beginning in the summer of 2020, the Public Education Department (PED) unveiled a new statewide literacy framework focused on helping students to gain foundational reading skills early in their academic journeys.

Literacy Achievement in New Mexico

In New Mexico, literacy assessment scores are low. Results from the 2019 administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found 24 percent of children in grade four in New Mexico scored at or above proficiency in reading. For students in grade eight, this was at 23 percent. For the same year, the national proficiency level was 35 percent for grade four and 34 percent for grade eight, demonstrating New Mexico students lag behind national scores by 11 percentage points.

Key Takeaways

Literacy proficiency is essential both as an inherent skill and as a mode of delivering instruction—85 percent of school curriculums are delivered via reading.

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In New Mexico, 24 percent of children in grade four are proficient in reading according to national assessments. State assessments show similarly low achievement with 34 percent of all students achieving proficiency in the 2021–2022 school year.

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To address low literacy and findings in the *Martinez-Yazzie* consolidated lawsuit, New Mexico transitioned to a model of structured literacy in the 2019–2020 school year.

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ELA Proficiency by Student Subgroup
2021-2022 School Year

Student Subgroup	Number of Students Proficient	Number of Students Tested	Proficiency Rate
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2,711	15,759	17%
Asian	1,143	1,870	61%
Black or African American	875	2,764	32%
Caucasian	17,499	33,450	52%
Hispanic	28,900	98,630	29%
Multiracial	1,612	3,637	44%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	91	194	47%
Total	52,831	156,304	34%

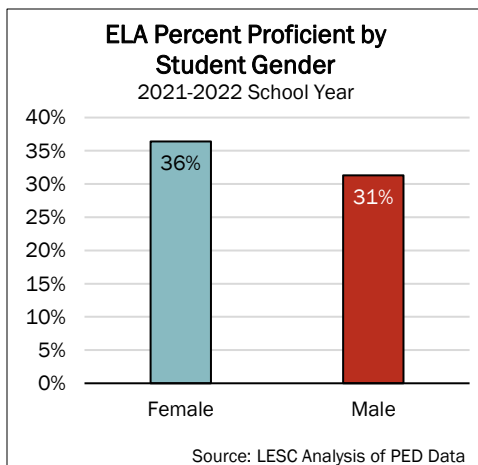
Source: LESC Analysis of PED Data

Early Literacy Proficiency
1station (Grades K - 2)

Group	Number of Students Tested	Proficiency Rate
Female	29,789	28%
Male	30,944	27%
Caucasian	12,792	40%
Black or African American	1,000	26%
Hispanic	38,806	24%
Asian	828	49%
Native American	*	≤ 20%
Free and Reduced Lunch	39,047	22%
Students with Disabilities	*	≤ 20%
English Language Learners	*	≤ 20%
Migrant	*	*
Homeless	*	≤ 20%
Military	1,408	41%
Foster	*	*
All Students	60,735	27%

*Data not reported by PED

Source: LESC Analysis of PED Data



More recently conducted state assessments show similar findings. Assessment data from the statewide New Mexico Measures of Student Success and Achievement (NM-MSSA), a brand new state assessment first administered in school year 2021–2022, found just over a third (34 percent) of students achieved proficiency in English language arts (ELA) assessments across grades three through eight.

These results also confirm the ongoing existence of achievement gaps for students who are economically disadvantaged, English language learners, or students with disabilities. Results from the NM-MSSA for

the 2021–2022 school year show a 22 percent proficiency rate in ELA for economically disadvantaged students, a 13 percent proficiency rate in ELA for English language learners, and a 9 percent proficiency rate in ELA for students with disabilities.

2022 NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Scores

While the most recent release of NAEP scores showed a nationwide decline in both reading and math scores, this was not a fully administered NAEP assessment and was instead a [long-term trend reading and mathematics assessment](#). This special assessment was administered to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student achievement and compared student scores from the winter of 2020 with student scores in the winter of 2022. Average nationwide scores on this assessment showed a five point decline in reading scores and a seven point decline in mathematics scores. While it is likely these scores reflect an overall drop in achievement across states as well, these are not full NAEP assessment scores and should not be used as such.

Martinez-Yazzie Consolidated Lawsuit Findings

Among several [findings](#) of fact and conclusions of law and order from the *Martinez-Yazzie* consolidated lawsuit, the court found New Mexico’s public education system violates the education clause of the New Mexico Constitution because several educational inputs are inadequate. Among these educational inputs is a lack of research-based reading programs. The court noted “literacy programs and practices that are based on valid research are essential to ensure low-income students learn how to read at grade level.”



Reading Achievement in the United States

Third Grade Reading Proficiency

Research shows third grade is a pivotal grade level for reading success. A long-term [study](#) by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, published in 2010, established the importance of reading proficiency by the end of grade three. This study found that until the end of grade three, students are often *learning to read*. Beginning in fourth grade, however, students begin to *read to learn*. At this point, and continuing into future academic years, students must use literacy skills to decipher texts and other sources of information so they can gain information across all subject areas. Students also use their literacy skills in later grades to think critically and assess information and knowledge being shared with them. This makes reading proficiency by the end of third grade paramount for students' future academic success.

Low achievement in reading also has long-term implications beyond student performance. [Research](#) shows failing to read at proficiency by the end of third grade decreases the likelihood a student will graduate on time. One in six children who are not reading at proficiency by third grade do not graduate from high school on time.

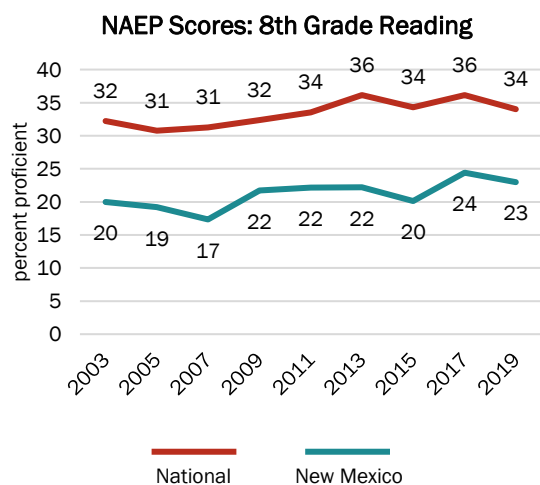
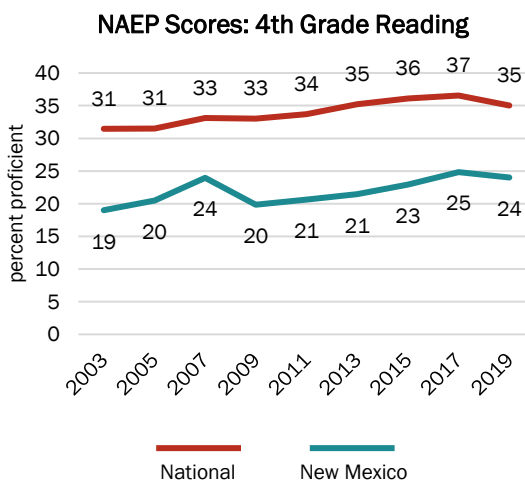
Nationwide Structured Literacy Results

The Mississippi Model. In 2014, Mississippi instituted statewide structured literacy programming, beginning a model of instruction that sparked nationwide change in how reading instruction is delivered. Mississippi specifically used the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) suite, a professional learning course developed by the company Lexia, with its teachers in kindergarten through third grade. In Mississippi, this was part of an effort to align reading instruction to evidence-based practices.

A [2017 evaluation](#) of Mississippi's LETRS implementation from the Southeast Regional Education Laboratory, a federally funded implementation network, found that as a result of its LETRS program, the state saw increases in average educator knowledge, quality of instruction, and average student engagement. Then, in 2019, Mississippi was the only state in the country to show improvements in reading proficiency on the NAEP between 2017 and 2019.

Since 2019, 23 states have contracted with Lexia—the company that offers LETRS training—to provide some level of statewide training. New Mexico is among the states that is now using LETRS training with its educators as part of its statewide strategy to offer structured literacy instruction for students.

Reading at proficiency by the end of third grade is pivotal. Until the end of grade three, students are often *learning to read*. Beginning in fourth grade, however, students begin to *read to learn*.

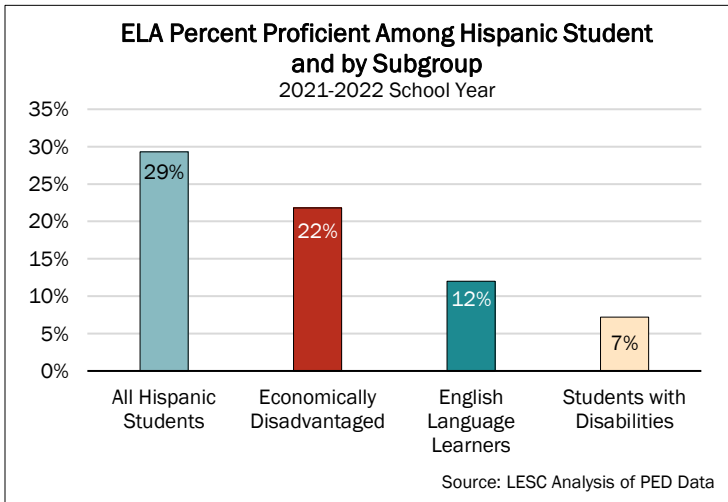
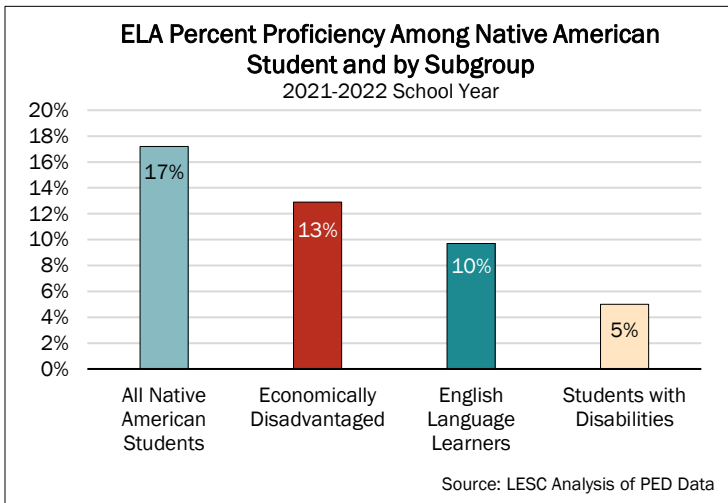
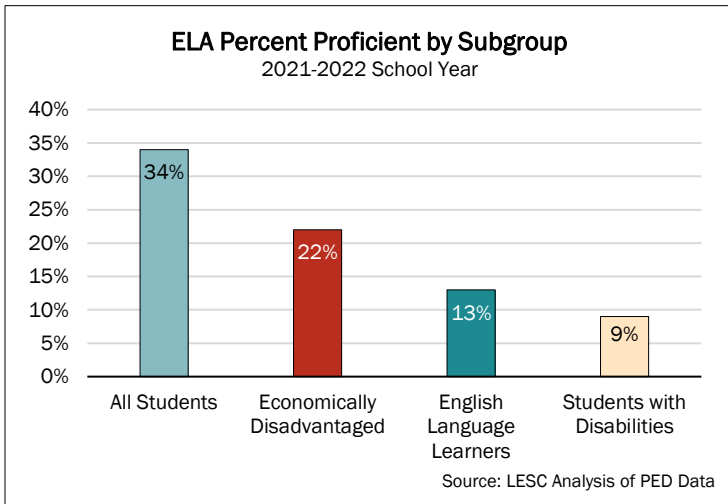


Section 22-13-32 NMSA 1978 Provisions

Given the *Martinez-Yazzie* consolidated lawsuit findings, the status of reading assessment scores, and the need for research-based reading programs, in 2019, the Legislature passed—and the governor signed—a state law that transitioned New Mexico’s approach to literacy to a model of structured literacy. See [Section 22-13-32 NMSA 1978](#).

Structured literacy is an umbrella term used to describe evidence-based approaches for helping students learn to read and write proficiently. It is an approach to reading instruction in which educators teach students to read by carefully structuring important literacy skills, concepts, and the sequence of instruction. In addition to requiring literacy plans that include detailed frameworks for structured literacy, this section of law also requires the following:

1. All first grade students to be screened for characteristics of dyslexia and provided timely, appropriate, evidence-based, and effective intervention if warranted;
2. Every school district and charter school to develop and implement a literacy professional development plan that includes a detailed framework for structured literacy training. This plan must be implemented each school year and updated as necessary; and
3. School districts and charter schools to train school administrators and teachers who teach reading to implement appropriate evidence-based reading interventions and special education teachers to provide structured literacy programming for students.



Prior to 2019, the Public Education Department (PED) used a reading program called Reads to Lead. In 2019, the then secretary-designate of the department indicated the state had not seen results from this initiative and did not request funding to continue the program. Subsequently, there was no funding for early literacy initiatives at the PED for FY20. At this point, New Mexico also pivoted to a strategy focused on providing structured literacy.

Effective Instruction for English Learners

New Mexico’s student demographics are distinctive with classrooms in the state serving the largest percentage of Hispanic students in the country and the second largest percentage of Native American students. Nearly 54 thousand students, or 16.8 percent, in New Mexico are English language learners. To meet the needs of all students, it is imperative that linguistic needs are embedded into academic instruction.

The PED, in collaboration with Dual Language Education of New Mexico, has published [guidance](#) about structured literacy for English language learners, with a particular focus on instruction in Spanish.

State Funding for Literacy

At the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, the PED launched a statewide literacy initiative: Structured Literacy New Mexico. Since the transition to this initiative for literacy instruction, the Legislature has allocated \$38.9 million in funding to support structured literacy in FY21 to FY23. During the 2022 legislative session, the Legislature allocated \$19.5 million for school districts and charter schools to provide structured literacy interventions and develop literacy collaborative models to support students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

The Public Education Department (PED) also identified the 2021–2022 school year as the “Year of Literacy” and requested the entirety of the FY23 appropriation of \$19.5 million be allocated to provide educators in grades kindergarten through grade five with LETRS professional development, which focuses on the science of reading.

The 2022 GAA allocated \$8 million from the general fund and \$3.5 million from the public education reform fund to PED. The remaining \$8 million for FY23 was allocated from the general fund directly to districts and charter schools through the state equalization guarantee (SEG) funding formula.

FY18–FY23 Early Literacy Funding to Public Education Department

(in millions)

	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	Total Funds FY21–FY23 (Transition to structured literacy framework)
Early Literacy Initiative	\$12.5	\$8.8	\$ –	\$9.7	\$9.7	\$19.5	\$38.9

Source: LESC Files; LFC Files

Components of Structured Literacy

There are several theories of reading and reading instruction used to teach students how to read. These include whole language, balanced literacy, simple view of reading, active view of reading, and structured literacy.

New Mexico’s model of teaching literacy is structured literacy, a theory of reading instruction that draws on theories from cognitive psychology. As described in the [New Mexico Statewide Literacy Framework](#), there are six primary elements of structured literacy:

- **Phonology:** The study of the sound structure of spoken words.
- **Sound-Symbol Association:** The ability to map phonemes to printed letters.
- **Syllable Instruction:** Instruction of the six basic syllable types in the English language.
- **Morphology:** The study of morphemes including base words, roots, prefixes, and suffixes.
- **Syntax:** The set of principles that dictate the sequence and function of words in a sentence to convey meaning.
- **Semantics:** The aspect of language concerned with meaning.

Structured Literacy Learning for New Mexico Educators

PED reports that as of October 2022, 747 educators have completed LETRS training and an additional 5,286 educators are currently in the process of completing LETRS training. The department also estimates an additional 8,657 educators that teach across grades three, four, and five still need to begin their LETRS training.

Budget and Policy Considerations

Continue funding to support screening for characteristics of dyslexia, development of literacy plans, and professional development in structured literacy. The Legislature allocated \$19.5 million to support the implementation of structured literacy across New Mexico schools for FY23, aligned with provisions of Section 22-13-32 NMSA 1978. As the state continues to phase in LETRS professional development—aligned with its structured literacy strategy—the Legislature should continue support of these initiatives to ensure statewide professional development and implementation of a structured literacy approach at a high level of fidelity.

Relevant Budget Line Items:	Relevant Policy Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Early literacy and reading support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In FY23, the Legislature allocated \$19.5 million to support the implementation of structured literacy across New Mexico schools. Sustaining this funding will allow additional implementation of the provisions of Senate Bill 398 from the 2019 legislative session and PED's New Mexico Statewide Structured Literacy Framework.

Attend to additional factors that impact student achievement including socioeconomics, appropriate instructional materials, teacher professional development, and student subgroup inclusion. Achievement data from both national and New Mexico assessments show meaningful differences in reading proficiency by student subgroup including English language learners, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities. Reading proficiency also varies across additional student subgroups such as race and ethnic identity. As student achievement is impacted by a wide range of factors, both in and out of school, it is important to provide education that is culturally and linguistically appropriate, ensure ongoing educator professional work and learning, and provide access to high quality instructional materials—all of which can support student achievement.

Relevant Budget Line Items:	Relevant Policy Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teacher and principal professional development.• Culturally and linguistically responsive education• At-risk factor.• Instructional materials.• Family income index funding.• TESOL and bilingual endorsements.• Bilingual multicultural education act.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide funding within the state equalization guarantee for educator professional learning and work.• Implement a student-centered accountability system that identifies shortcomings in the educational continuum at the school district or charter school, school, classroom, or even parent level that may be contributing to student's academic challenges.

Study how teacher preparation programs may support teacher candidates to exit programs with professional skills to teach literacy aligned with New Mexico's structured literacy framework. As New Mexico continues its transition to a structured literacy approach, educator preparation programs in New Mexico could align higher education classroom content and

teaching with the skill development educators will need to teach reading in New Mexico classrooms. Many educators have also noted the effectiveness of LETRS professional development with many believing it should be included in initial training in educator preparation programs.

Relevant Budget Line Items:	Relevant Policy Considerations:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educator preparation programs could be directed to evaluate how closely their higher education curriculums are aligned with educator proficiencies needed to facilitate New Mexico's structured literacy framework.

Study implications of retention for students who are severely below grade level. Some states have adopted third grade retention policies as a measure to improve literacy achievement. The Education Commission of the States reports that as of September 2020, at least 17 states and D.C. [require retention](#) of students who are not reading at proficiency by third grade with good cause exemptions. These exemptions can include factors such as English language learner status or demonstrating proficiency through alternative assessments and evaluations. Research about the effectiveness of these policies to improve reaching achievement, however, is mixed. If mandatory retention is considered as a policy, it must be paired with strong curriculum, supports for students, educator professional development, and school leadership to help support student learning.

Relevant Budget Line Items:	Relevant Policy Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early literacy and reading support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct a study of both the potential benefits and consequences, both intended and unintended, of requiring retention at third grade for students who are not reading at proficiency.

Ensure assessments allow for long-term analysis of effectiveness of literacy professional learning and student interventions. To determine effectiveness of New Mexico's structured literacy framework, assessments must be used to monitor student achievement and growth. In addition, it will be important for these assessments to allow for long-term study of what factors embedded into New Mexico's framework may support, or hinder, student achievement. It is also imperative that the state implements a long-term assessment and accountability system that allows for the tracking of achievement data over time. Data can then be used to tie the Legislature's investments directly to the students they are intended to support, and identify steps along the educational continuum where the system may not be supporting student achievement as intended.

Relevant Budget Line Items:	Relevant Policy Considerations:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure statutory assessment requirements are crafted to capture long-term data needed to determine effectiveness of early literacy interventions, LETRS professional development, school district and charter school literacy plans, and use of screeners in first grade. • Implement a student-centered accountability system that identifies shortcomings in the educational continuum at the school district or charter school, school, classroom, or even parent level that may be contributing to student's academic challenges.