

America's Literacy Story

What the Data Tell Us—and Why Texas Should Pay Attention

iLEAD

Misti M. Green

Founder & CEO, iLEAD Consulting LLC

October 2026

www.iLEADmb.com

© 2026

INTRODUCTION

The Literacy Landscape

Looking beyond a single score to understand where students are now and how the trajectory is changing.

The literacy landscape in America continues to shift, and the most recent national data give us reason to look closely at where students are now, where they were before COVID-19, and what has happened since. The story is not the same for every student, every state, or even every age group. Some younger readers are beginning to regain ground, while other data show that significant reading gaps remain. To understand where we are, we have to look at the trajectory, not simply the latest score.

The most recent state-comparable reading results come from the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often called The Nation's Report Card. In 2024, **31% of fourth-grade students nationally performed at or above NAEP Proficient in reading**. Put another way, 69% did not reach the NAEP Proficient level. The percentage reaching NAEP Proficient was two points lower than in 2022 and four points lower than in 2019. The national average Grade 4 reading score was also two points lower than in 2022 and five points lower than in 2019.[1]

PARENT NOTE: NAEP Proficient is not the same thing as a state's definition of "on grade level." A child who does not reach NAEP Proficient should not automatically be described as reading below grade level.[1]

TEXAS CONNECTION

Why Texas and the South Matter to Me

My focus on Texas is intentional. **Texas is home, and after nearly 30 years in public and private education here, you could call me invested.** I began as a reading teacher in a large urban school system and later led literacy initiatives in another large urban district. My work has taken me from the classroom into campus administration, district leadership, school improvement, and educational consulting. My three children attended Texas public schools. For me, the quality of education in this state has never been an abstract professional issue. It is personal.

The South has my heart, too. I understand our communities, our schools, and the differences in resources and educational opportunities that continue to shape children's experiences across and within them. My professional journey now allows me to work with school systems across the country, but **I will always be a reading teacher first and an advocate for Texas students.** I want our students to have access to strong instruction, knowledgeable teachers, challenging learning opportunities, and the support they need when they struggle.

Access, however, is only part of the equation. **The goal must be success.** That is why I look closely at these data. They help us understand where we are, but the conversation cannot end with a percentage, a letter grade, or a test score. It has to come back to the children represented by those numbers and what they experience in classrooms every day.

UNDERSTANDING THE DATA

Why Are We Using 2024 Data in 2026?

The 2024 NAEP Grade 4 reading results remain the most recent published data that allow us to compare states using the same assessment and reporting framework. Individual states also administer assessments aligned with their own academic standards and accountability systems, which means state proficiency percentages should not be compared with NAEP as though they measure exactly the same thing.

Texas has newer information through the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR). The Texas Education Agency (TEA) released Spring 2026 STAAR results for Grades 3–8 in June 2026. NAEP provides a common measure for examining Texas in a national context, while STAAR offers a more current look at student performance within Texas.[3]

There is also newer national information. The 2025 NAEP Long-Term Trend assessment measured nationally representative samples of 9- and 13-year-olds. This is a separate, age-based assessment from the Grade 4 NAEP assessment, so the scores should not be directly compared. It does, however, give us another window into what has happened with reading performance since 2024.[2]

UNDERSTANDING THE DATA

What Is NAEP, and Who Actually Takes It?

NAEP does not test every child in the United States. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) selects representative samples of schools and students and uses those results to estimate performance for larger student populations.

For state-level NAEP reporting, the results represent public-school students, including students attending public charter schools. Private-school students are not included in individual state NAEP results. When we talk about Texas Grade 4 NAEP performance, then we are talking about an estimate of the performance of Texas public-school fourth graders based on the representative sample selected for the assessment, not every fourth-grade child living in Texas.[1]

STAAR works differently. It is the Texas state assessment administered to students in public school districts and open-enrollment charter schools in the grades and courses required by the state. Knowing the population behind each set of numbers is important because assessment results only

make sense when we understand **who was assessed, what was measured, and what the results are designed to tell us.**

NATIONAL TREND

What Happened Before and After COVID-19?

In 2019, the final main NAEP Grade 4 reading administration before COVID-19 disrupted schooling, the national average was 220. The average fell to 217 in 2022 and then to 215 in 2024. The percentage of fourth graders performing at or above NAEP Proficient followed the same direction, moving from 35% in 2019 to 33% in 2022 and 31% in 2024.[1]

The national average does not tell the whole story. Students who were already struggling with reading have lost more ground over time than stronger readers. In 2024, lower-performing fourth graders scored below where similarly performing students scored more than 30 years ago, while students at the highest end of the performance distribution scored above their 1992 peers.[1]

Our struggling readers have lost ground over the long term while our strongest readers are performing above where their peers were three decades ago.

The 2025 NAEP Long-Term Trend results offer some encouraging news. Reading scores for 9-year-olds increased four points from 2022, and lower-performing readers also improved. The same improvement was not seen among 13-year-olds, whose average reading score remained below its 2020 level.[2]

The newer data give us reason for cautious optimism with younger readers, but they also remind us that improvement is not happening evenly across ages or student groups.

REGIONAL LENS

Geography Matters, but the South Is Not One Literacy Story

National averages can hide important regional and state differences. From 2022 to 2024, Grade 4 reading scores declined significantly among students attending schools in the Midwest, South, and West.[1]

Within the South, the results vary considerably. Looking specifically at 2024 NAEP Grade 4 reading scores for public-school students, the Southern states I examined included Texas, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Tennessee. **Mississippi had an average NAEP reading score of 219, while Oklahoma averaged 207. Texas averaged 212, compared with the national public-school NAEP average of 214.**[4]

Mississippi is one state worth a closer look. Its Grade 4 NAEP reading score increased from **203 in 1998 to 219 in 2024**, a 16-point gain. That is real progress. It is also important to remember that Mississippi started at 203. **We can acknowledge how far a state has come without confusing growth with arrival.** Both numbers belong in the conversation.

We also need to look beyond the state average to see whether that progress has reached students across demographic and economic groups. In 2024, Black fourth graders in Mississippi had an average NAEP reading score of 206, compared with 215 for Hispanic students and 231 for White students. NAEP uses “Black” to include African American students and “Hispanic” to include Latino students. Students identified as economically disadvantaged averaged 212, compared with 238 for students not identified as economically disadvantaged.[4]

Mississippi’s progress is real, but the statewide average does not tell us who is experiencing that progress and who is not.

EQUITY LENS

Who Is Experiencing the Gains—and Who Is Not?

The same question should be asked whenever we examine national, state, district, or campus data. An overall average can tell us whether performance is moving, but it cannot tell us whether students are experiencing that movement in the same way.

NAEP uses the federal term English learners. Texas uses emergent bilingual students, so I use the Texas terminology when discussing Texas students and retain English learners when reporting a NAEP category directly.

In the 2024 national results, Grade 4 reading scores declined from 2022 for numerous student groups, including male and female students, public-school students, students attending schools in the South, and students identified as English learners as well as those not identified as English learners. NAEP did not report a statistically significant decline for every racial, ethnic, economic, or disability group.[5]

The 2025 Long-Term Trend results provide a different picture for younger students. Among 9-year-olds, several groups improved, including male students, economically disadvantaged students, public-school students, students with and without identified disabilities, and students not identified as English learners.[2]

When we break the overall number apart, we get a clearer picture of which students are moving forward and which students still need more from us.

What Should We Be Looking For?

The data tell us where students are, but they cannot tell us everything about the instruction students have experienced along the way. One group deserves particular attention as we think about the years before and after COVID-19. **Students who entered kindergarten in fall 2019 are now in middle school.** Their earliest years of reading instruction were interrupted during a critical period for developing foundational literacy skills. The question now is whether educators identified and addressed gaps that emerged during those years as these students moved through elementary school.

For some students, those gaps may involve decoding and automatic word recognition. For others, the need may be fluency, vocabulary, morphology, language development, background knowledge, or comprehension. Those needs do not disappear because a child moves into middle school. **A seventh-grade student can still be carrying an unfinished piece of the literacy foundation that should have been developed years earlier.**

Districts and campuses need to examine the entire literacy system rather than relying on one program or initiative to solve the problem. **High-quality instructional materials (HQIM) matter, but materials alone do not teach children.** Teachers need a strong understanding of literacy development and the instructional practices needed to support students reading above grade level, students meeting grade-level expectations, and students with gaps in literacy development.

Flexible small-group instruction should be part of that system, but simply placing students into groups is not enough. Teachers should know why students are grouped, which specific skill or need is being addressed, what instruction will occur, how long that support is needed, and what evidence will determine whether students are progressing. As student needs change, the groups and the instruction should change with them.

Campus leaders also need clear expectations for monitoring literacy instruction and student performance. Classroom observations and teacher appraisal should help leaders determine whether students consistently engage with grade-level and appropriately challenging text, whether teachers explicitly model new learning, whether students receive guided practice before they are expected to work independently, and whether instruction changes when evidence shows students have not mastered a skill.

None of that happens well without investing in teachers first. **We cannot expect teachers to provide explicit, high-quality literacy instruction if they have not been given the knowledge, training, modeling, coaching, and time necessary to learn how to provide it.** Professional learning should not end when a training session ends. Teachers need opportunities to see effective instruction modeled, practice it with support, receive feedback, and refine their instruction.

INSTRUCTIONAL IMPLICATION: Strong literacy systems connect materials, teacher knowledge, flexible support, assessment evidence, coaching, and campus leadership. No single program can substitute for that coherence.

WRITING MATTERS

Reading and Writing Are Connected in Texas

Writing belongs in this conversation too, particularly in Texas. The STAAR redesign implemented in the 2022–23 school year combined reading and writing within the Reading Language Arts assessment and eliminated the former standalone Grade 4 and Grade 7 writing tests. Current STAAR Reading Language Arts assessments include evidence-based writing, and students are expected to respond in writing to what they read.[6]

That shift has implications for instruction. Students need to learn how to explain their thinking, use evidence, organize a response, and communicate clearly in writing. Teachers need the instructional knowledge to model that process, guide students through it, provide meaningful feedback, and gradually move students toward independence. **Asking a student to write a constructed response is not the same as teaching that student how to construct one.**

The same principle runs through literacy instruction more broadly. Before we ask whether students can do something independently, we should be able to answer whether we explicitly taught them how to do it. The curriculum matters. The quality of instructional materials matters. Assessment and leadership matter. **Students still need teachers who know the content, know how to teach it, and know what to do when a student does not learn it the first time.**

TEXAS FOCUS

Why Should Texas Pay Attention?

Texas has reasons to recognize progress, but we also have reasons to keep looking closely. In 2024, Texas fourth graders had an average NAEP reading score of 212, compared with 214 for public-school students nationally. More recent STAAR results show largely stable Reading Language Arts performance, with improvement in Grades 7 and 8. Neither number, however, tells us that the work is finished.

What concerns me most is what can disappear inside an average. A state can hold steady while some students continue to struggle. A district can improve its accountability rating while individual children

still have unfinished literacy skills. Students who began kindergarten in 2019 are now sitting in our middle school classrooms, and for some of them, early gaps in decoding, fluency, vocabulary, language development, or comprehension may still be present.

That is why Texas should pay attention. Not because the data tell us that everything is going wrong, but because they give us an opportunity to ask better questions while there is still time to respond. Are we identifying reading gaps early enough? Do teachers know exactly what students need when they struggle? Are our instructional materials translating into strong classroom instruction? Are students being challenged when they are ready for more? Do campus leaders know what effective literacy instruction should look and sound like when they walk into a classroom?

For a state serving millions of public-school students, those are not small questions. They ask whether the systems we have built are producing the outcomes we want for Texas children.

TEXAS NOW

What Do We Know About Texas Right Now?

The most current Texas data add another layer to the picture. TEA released Spring 2026 STAAR results for Grades 3–8 on June 16, reporting that Reading Language Arts performance remained largely stable or improved across nearly all grade levels. **Grade 8 increased three percentage points from 2025, Grade 7 increased two points, Grades 4–6 maintained their 2025 performance levels, and Grade 3 decreased one point.**[3]

Families can access individual student results through their local district family portal or [TexasAssessment.gov](https://texasassessment.gov), while the Texas Assessment Research Portal provides aggregate results.[3]

Texas also released 2026 A–F accountability ratings for districts and campuses. The accountability system is broader than STAAR reading performance and considers three areas: Student Achievement, School Progress, and Closing the Gaps.[7] That distinction is important because **an overall district rating should never be read as a district’s literacy grade.**

The timing of Texas reporting can also confuse families. Although 2026 STAAR results and preliminary 2026 accountability information are available, the 2025–26 School Report Cards are not yet available. TEA’s accountability calendar schedules the 2025–26 School Report Cards, Texas Academic Performance Reports (TAPR), and final 2026 accountability ratings for December 2026.[8]

TEXAS DISTRICT SNAPSHOT

Selected Large Texas School Districts

Enrollment and overall accountability provide context, but neither replaces a close look at student learning.

Texas educates more than five million public-school students across communities that differ enormously in size, demographics, resources, and local context. A statewide result cannot show us what is happening in every school system, and a district rating cannot tell us what every child within that district is experiencing. The snapshot below includes several of the state's largest school districts and Arlington ISD, a North Texas system connected to my own professional experience. The purpose is not to rank districts, but to place enrollment and overall accountability information side by side so parents and educators can see the scale of the systems represented and the direction of movement in their overall ratings.[7][9]

District	2025–26 Enrollment	2025 Rating / Score	2026 Rating / Score	Change
Houston Independent School District (Houston)	167,793	B / 84	B / 85	+1
Dallas Independent School District (Dallas)	134,302	B / 83	B / 85	+2
Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District (Cypress/Houston area)	114,430	B / 85	B / 86	+1
Northside Independent School District (San Antonio)	98,031	C / 75	C / 78	+3
Katy Independent School District (Katy)	95,136	B / 88	B / 88	0
Fort Bend Independent School District (Sugar Land/Fort Bend County)	77,929	B / 80	B / 82	+2
Conroe Independent School District (Conroe)	72,218	B / 85	B / 85	0
Austin Independent School District (Austin)	69,000	C / 79	B / 81	+2
Fort Worth Independent School District (Fort Worth)	67,315	C / 73	C / 77	+4
Frisco Independent School District (Frisco)	62,627	A / 90	A / 91	+1
North East Independent School District (San Antonio)	53,464	C / 78	B / 81	+3
Aldine Independent School District (Houston area)	52,115	C / 75	C / 79	+4
Arlington Independent School District (Arlington)	51,102	C / 77	C / 78	+1

Note: Enrollment figures are 2025–26 counts used for this publication snapshot. The ratings shown are overall TEA accountability ratings, not reading or literacy scores. The 2026 public ratings released in August are preliminary; TEA's calendar schedules final 2026 ratings for December 2026.[7][8][9]

The numeric scores provide context that a letter grade by itself can hide. Fort Worth ISD, for example, remained a C while moving from 73 to 77. Austin ISD moved from C/79 to B/81, while North East ISD moved from C/78 to B/81. Houston and Dallas remained B districts while their numeric scores increased. Arlington remained a C while moving from 77 to 78.[9]

Those movements are worth seeing, but they should not be used to tell a story the data cannot tell. An overall accountability score cannot, by itself, explain why a district improved, why another remained stable, or what is happening with an individual child's reading development.

A district can improve while an individual child struggles, and a child can thrive academically even when the district around that child faces broader challenges.

Parents need both kinds of information: an understanding of how the school and district are performing and a clear picture of how their own child is progressing. When a child is struggling with reading, families should be able to ask which specific skills need additional instruction, what support is being provided, how often that support occurs, who is providing it, and what evidence will show whether it is working. Parents should not have to wait until an end-of-year assessment to learn that their child has struggled throughout the school year.

CLOSING PERSPECTIVE

Where Do We Go From Here?

By the time we reach the end of all these numbers, the question is no longer simply what happened. We need to ask what we will do with what the data have shown us.

The literacy conversation has to move beyond whether a state or district has adopted a particular initiative, purchased new instructional materials, or provided professional development. **We need to know what students are actually experiencing in classrooms and whether that instruction is helping them become stronger, more independent readers, writers, and thinkers.**

Texas is home, so I am invested in what happens next. My national consulting work has given me the opportunity to see what is possible when school systems align strong leadership, coherent instruction, meaningful assessment, and sustained support for teachers. I want our Texas students to benefit from that same level of intentionality. I want them to be among the students leading the country forward, and I believe we have a responsibility to keep asking what it will take to get more of them there.

National and state data can point us toward areas of concern, but students experience education one classroom at a time. A child does not experience a state average, a district percentage, or an accountability rating. A child experiences the text placed in front of them, the questions they are asked

to think about, the instruction they receive when they struggle, the challenge they are given when they are ready for more, and the teacher making instructional decisions based on what they need.

THE WORK OF iLEAD: I work with school and district leaders nationally to move from data to instructional action—strengthening alignment among standards, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the systems that support teachers. The goal is not a better report. It is stronger outcomes for students.

Nearly 30 years after I first entered a classroom as a reading teacher, I still see this work that way. Behind every percentage, scale score, accountability rating, and trend line is a child whose school experience is unfolding right now. Our responsibility is not simply to document where that child has been. **It is to recognize what they need, respond while there is still time to change their trajectory, and ensure that where they started does not determine where they finish.**

REFERENCES

Sources & Citations

Official national and Texas sources used throughout this publication.

- [1] National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), The Nation's Report Card — 2024 NAEP Reading.
- [2] National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2025 NAEP Long-Term Trend Reading and Mathematics Assessments.
- [3] Texas Education Agency, "TEA Releases Spring 2026 STAAR Results for Grades 3–8," June 16, 2026.
- [4] National Center for Education Statistics, The Nation's Report Card — State Profiles, Grade 4 Reading.
- [5] National Center for Education Statistics, 2024 NAEP Reading — Student Group and Regional Results.
- [6] Texas Education Agency, STAAR Redesign and Evidence-Based Writing Resources.
- [7] Texas Education Agency, 2026 A–F Accountability Rating System.
- [8] Texas Education Agency, 2026 Accountability Manual and Calendar.
- [9] Texas Education Agency, TXschools.gov District Profiles and 2025–26 enrollment/accountability information.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Misti Green

Misti Green is the founder and CEO of iLEAD Consulting LLC and a national educational consultant specializing in instructional coherence, curriculum design, school improvement, leadership development, and district implementation systems. With nearly 30 years of experience across classroom, campus, district, and consulting roles, she partners with school systems to clarify instructional priorities, strengthen alignment among standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and build the leadership and implementation systems that support stronger outcomes for students and educators. Her work bridges strategy and implementation, helping leadership teams move from compliance to clarity and from planning to measurable instructional impact.

www.iLEADmb.com