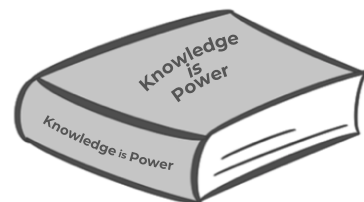
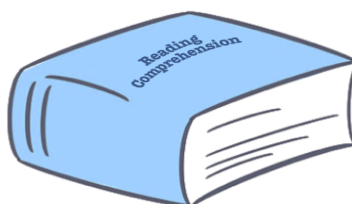
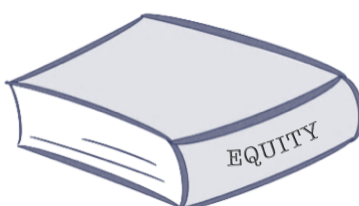
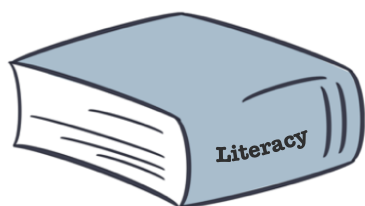


Steady Habits, Stagnant Results:

CT Solutions for Equity & Excellence in Literacy



Executive Summary

Connecticut is facing a long-term literacy crisis. While we know that building solid literacy skills is important during the early years, too few of the state's 3rd and 4th graders are meeting grade-level expectations. The state also has wide gaps in reading attainment by race. These disparities reflect an ongoing civil rights injustice that echoes a painful national and statewide history of deliberately denying segments of our society an equal opportunity to read and learn. But literacy is a struggle for all students, not only students from traditionally under-served populations. We have to do better.

There's a correct method for literacy instruction, and we aren't using it. Although there is a long-standing consensus among cognitive scientists and educational researchers about the correct way to teach literacy skills—the Science of Reading—Connecticut's education system hasn't systematized its use.

Key Findings:

CT Has a Long-Term Literacy Crisis.

- Between the first and most recent administrations of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium test (SBAC), we've seen a change of only 0.7 percentage points in the percentage of 3rd graders meeting or exceeding expectations in English Language Arts (ELA). In 2019, just 54.3% of 3rd graders met the mark.
- Over the same time period, the percent of 4th graders reaching proficiency levels in Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has decreased by 3.4 percentage points. In 2019, only 40.1% of 4th graders hit that benchmark.

CT's Literacy Crisis Leaves Many Students Unprepared.

- About 47% of all 3rd graders are falling short of grade-level benchmarks in ELA on the SBAC.
- About 58% of all 4th graders are falling short of proficiency in Reading on the NAEP.

CT's Literacy Crisis is A Matter of Racial Justice.

- The state also has wide gaps in reading attainment by race, reflecting an ongoing civil rights injustice that echoes a painful national and statewide history of deliberately denying segments of our society an equal opportunity to read and learn.

CT's Literacy Crisis Is A Statewide Problem.

- When viewed from a socioeconomic perspective, literacy problems span all income levels: almost a third of 3rd graders who are not from low-income families fall short of grade-level expectations in ELA on the SBAC.

CT's Literacy Crisis Contributes to Escalating Special Education Expenses.

- In Connecticut, over 15% of students are diagnosed as having learning disabilities.
- The possibility of over-diagnosis of disability due to ineffective literacy instruction needs further investigation.

Opportunities for State-Led Solutions:

There is already significant cognitive and educational research about how to effectively teach literacy. Building off of the large and impressive body of work from leaders in the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus; the Connecticut K-3 Literacy Initiative (also known as the Connecticut Literacy Model); the Commission on Women, Children and Seniors; HILL for Literacy; Literacy How; and the UConn Neag School of Education, we make recommendations for five policy solutions.

Steady Habits, Stagnant Results:

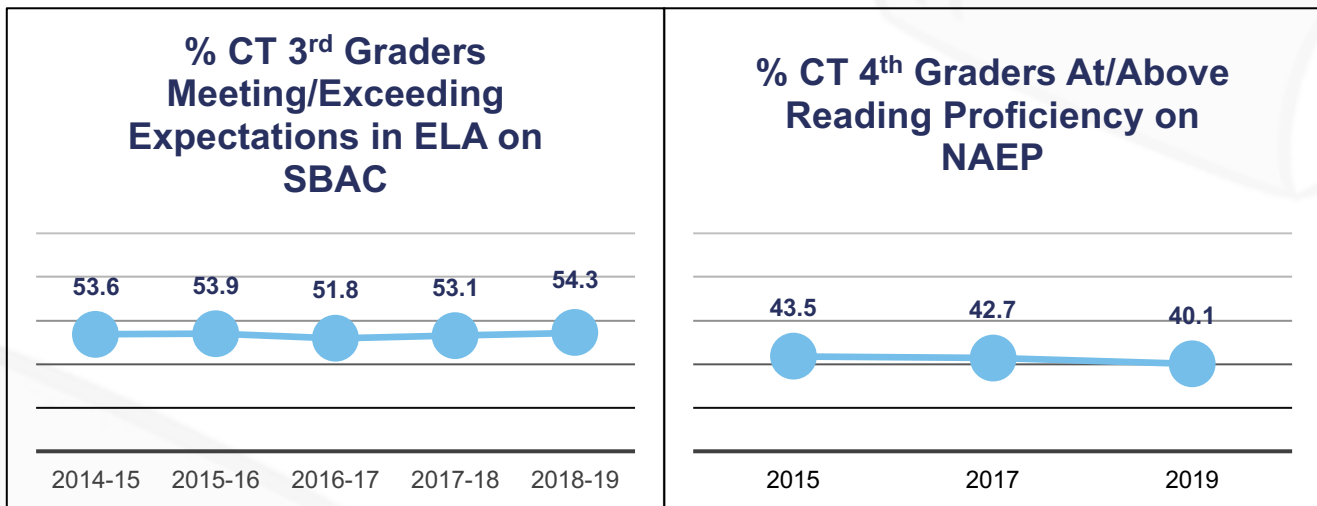
CT Solutions for Equity & Excellence in Literacy

In Connecticut, local government contributes to the type of instruction and resources available in schools and districts. This significant autonomy from town to town—from what curriculum is used to the ratio of educators to pupils—can have a major impact on opportunity and success for students. However, even though factors vary widely, the data documenting a literacy problem in subgroups across Connecticut clearly supports a central idea:

We have a long-term literacy crisis in Connecticut.

Our reading scores, which show only half of 3rd graders meeting expectations, have stagnated. Students who do not learn the basic reading skills required to think critically and compete at an early age are not prepared to finish college-level work or join a demanding, skilled workforce.

Research shows that most children learn to read before 3rd grade. After that, they use the literacy skills they have acquired in their earlier years, reading to learn and reason across subjects.ⁱ Since reading proficiently by the end of third grade can dramatically impact a child’s prospectsⁱⁱ for success in school and beyond, we’ve taken a look at the data on the 3rd grade Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium test (SBAC) and the 4th grade National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP).



These outcomes don’t appear to be improving. Between the first and most recent administrations of the SBAC, we’ve seen a change of only 0.7 percentage points—**essentially stagnant results**. Our results have decreased by 3.4 percentage points over the administrations of the NAEP during the same period of time.

This should be a call to action. Instead, in the land of steady habits, some of Connecticut’s public schools and districts continue to use strategies for teaching literacy that have been debunkedⁱⁱⁱ for decades.

Utilizing the Science of Reading

Cognitive scientists refer to a body of knowledge called “structured literacy,” which describes the Science of Reading—the most effective method of teaching literacy: namely, by explicitly focusing on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.^{iv} This knowledge stands in contrast to the “balanced literacy approach”—a now-outdated method of reading instruction—which uses cueing and contextual hints over phonics.^v Mississippi, a state not known for its public schools, has spent several years training and updating its teachers on the Science of Reading, and it was the **only** state in the nation to make significant gains in 4th grade reading on the most recent administration of the NAEP.^{vi}

We’ve also seen the Science of Reading work within our own borders. In 2012, Connecticut embarked upon a pilot literacy initiative that had been developed by the General Assembly’s Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, based upon a study of best practices in early literacy.^{vii} The resultant CT K-3 Literacy Initiative (CK3LI), also known as Connecticut’s Literacy Model, used the Science of Reading to create school-wide improvement plans for reading and intensive reading interventions, and provide ongoing literacy coaching and professional development.^{viii} In 2016, a briefing at the State Capitol reported that schools that had participated in the pilot program had more than doubled the number of students meeting grade-level goals for literacy, and the number of students at risk for reading failure in these schools decreased by more than half.^{ix} Today—according to the Commission on Women, Children and Seniors—the program has been used by 76 schools from 17 districts, producing measurable improvements in reading.^x

There’s a proven way to teach literacy: through the Science of Reading.

Our failure to use this body of knowledge in all Connecticut school districts and train teachers in strong literacy pedagogy has: (1) left students unprepared for success after high school; (2) perpetuated a shameful history of racial oppression; (3) impacted all students across the state; and (4) contributed unnecessarily to escalating special education expenses.

1. CT’s Literacy Crisis Leaves Many Students Unprepared.

Since 2014, roughly half, or 53% of 3rd graders across the state, have met or exceeded expectations in ELA on the SBAC.^{xi} In other words, almost 47% of all 3rd grade students—of all racial and economic backgrounds—are not meeting grade-level benchmarks.^{xii}

During those same years on the NAEP exam, which has a slightly higher “proficiency” benchmark and is administered every other year, only about 42% of 4th graders met the benchmark^{xiii}—meaning that around 58% did not^{xiv}. These shortcomings suggest a systemic failure to meet the needs of Connecticut students.

Last year, we issued a report called, “Less for More,” which uncovered low graduation rates and high costs in Connecticut’s system of higher education. Among our findings was that Connecticut had three four-year colleges that regularly graduate *less than half* of their student populations within six years of initial enrollment.^{xv} Although colleges can undoubtedly do more to address concerns like those raised in the report, we also know, because of high rates of remediation, that much of the struggle college-aged students face indicates a lack of preparedness during their K-12 years. A 2018 report by P20-WIN found that nearly half of all students who enrolled in one of Connecticut's State Universities took a remedial course within the first two years of enrollment.^{xvi}

Students are falling off track in the years before they enroll in higher education. Our K-12 system is leaving them unprepared for success.

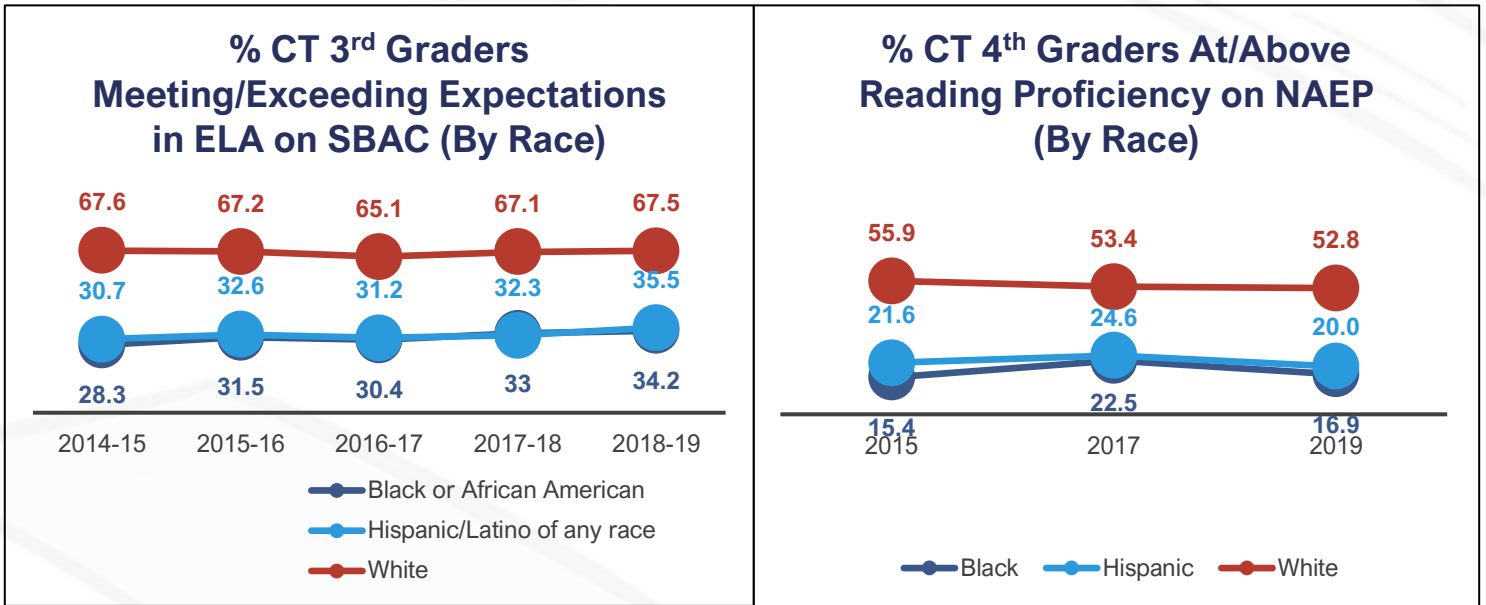
2. **CT’s Literacy Crisis is A Matter of Racial Justice.**

Beyond school, literacy is a foundational skill for economic development and civic participation. Audrey Azoulay, Director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), has described literacy as, “the first step towards freedom, towards liberation from social and economic constraints. It is the prerequisite for development, both individual and collective. It reduces poverty and inequality, creates wealth, and helps to eradicate problems of nutrition and public health.”^{xvii}

Denying segments of the population the opportunity to become literate has been a recurring feature of systemic racism in the United States.

Here in Connecticut, for instance, Prudence Crandall, a white teacher, opened "Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color" in the 1830s—also accepting the daughters of freed slaves from surrounding states. The Connecticut legislature responded by prohibiting the teaching of Black students from outside the state—leading to Crandall's arrest, judicial proceedings, acts of vandalism against the school, and the school's eventual closure.^{xviii} Across the country, many slave states similarly passed "anti-literacy laws" leading up to the Civil War, which prohibited teaching enslaved people to read and write. These efforts continued during the Jim Crow era to enforce subjugation and control, using literacy tests to prevent people of color from registering to vote.^{xix}

Today, inaction or apathy to improve reading outcomes for students of color is a continuation of this shameful chapter of racial oppression. Whether looking at the SBAC or the NAEP, disaggregating ELA and reading scores by race reveals a wide and consistent gap in attainment along racial lines.



In the 2018-19 school year, for example, there was a difference of 32 percentage points between the percent of white and Hispanic 3rd graders who met or exceeded expectations on the SBAC in ELA; between white and Black students on the same test, there was a 33.3 percentage point difference. Likewise, on the 2019 administration of the NAEP, there was a difference of 32.8 percentage points between the percent of white and Hispanic 4th graders meeting proficiency levels on the reading NAEP; between white and Black students on the 4th grade reading NAEP, the difference was 35.9 percentage points. These are obvious signs of opportunity gaps that are unacceptable.

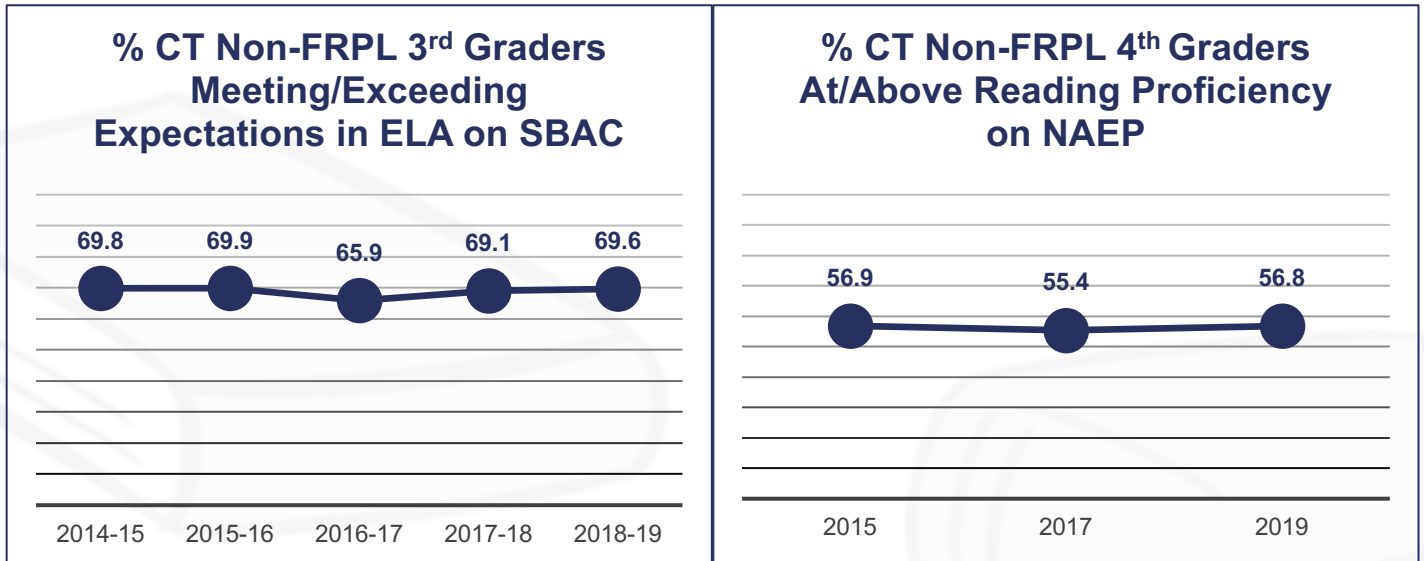
These outcomes represent a civil rights injustice in Connecticut and will likely ensure lasting inequality among Connecticut’s students of color without proper investments in literacy.

The inattention of Connecticut’s education system to what we know about cognitive development also leads to the over-diagnosis of minority students as learning disabled when they are actually learning English as a second language;^{xx} when a student’s literacy skills are measured solely by whether she reads at the level of her peers, educators may miss a more fine-tuned diagnosis—such as that the student needs to work on a particular skill, like phonemic awareness.

As a country, we have a long way to go before we can right the wrongs of our past. But in Connecticut, ensuring appropriate literacy development across racial lines is a tangible and meaningful way to increase opportunity.

3. CT's Literacy Crisis Is A Statewide Problem.

As much as Connecticut's significant opportunity gaps present an ongoing moral crisis—low performance in literacy is endemic to Connecticut's education system, transcending income levels. Looking only at the performances of students who don't come from low-income families—far too many don't meet grade-level expectations in ELA.



The state uses eligibility for free and reduced price lunch (FRPL) as a proxy for low-income households. Among Connecticut students who are not eligible for FRPL, about 31% of 3rd graders are falling short of grade-level benchmarks for ELA on the SBAC;^{xxi} on the NAEP, it's almost 44% of non-eligible 4th graders who aren't meeting proficiency levels.^{xxii}

What does it say about our education system when at least a third of Connecticut's most resourced students do not make the mark?

4. Quick Word on Special Education:

The state's struggle with literacy instruction is both unjust and widespread, but it also contributes unnecessarily to the escalating expense of special education. In Connecticut, over 15% of students are diagnosed as having learning disabilities,^{xxiii} a portion of the student population that has steadily increased over the past ten years^{xxiv}. Considering that (nationally at least) about 80% of learning disabilities manifest as problems learning to read,^{xxv} the possibility of over-diagnosis of disability due to ineffective literacy instruction seems worthy of further investigation. Misdiagnosis also often occurs for English Learners when they start learning to read in a second language, due to lack of proven instructional techniques.^{xxvi}

While proper literacy instruction is not a panacea that will alleviate all costs associated with special education, it would almost certainly reduce them. In the words of the International Literacy Association, why not invest in the method of instruction that is "helpful for all students, harmful for none, and crucial for some"^{xxvii}?

It Doesn't Have To Be This Way. Opportunities For State-Led Solutions:

The good news is that there is significant cognitive research about how to effectively teach literacy. We know what works. And, Connecticut has a huge opportunity to capitalize on this research and practically implement it in the form of a state-led endorsement of the Science of Reading, through expansion of the CK3LI program in our public schools.

However, the success of an initiative like CK3LI, especially if it is to be expanded statewide, is only as good as its implementation—which is dependent on sustaining capacity over the long-term. For this reason, the legislature is contemplating the development of a Center for Literacy Research and Success, which would be established by the Connecticut State Department of Education to help Connecticut coordinate a statewide reading plan, to develop a reading success strategy, to support districts in improving reading outcomes, and to collaborate with institutions of higher education so that teacher preparation programs train future teachers based on the Science of Reading.^{xxviii}

In essence, we need state-level leadership to systematize what we've learned from CK3LI—through teacher preparation, coaching, and interventions.

Accordingly, we propose the following policy pursuits to support Connecticut students:

1. Commit to long-term, sustaining, state-level investments to expand CK3LI.

CK3LI has been proven to produce dramatic results. Since the program's inception in 2012, the number of participating school districts has grown, but the allotted state resources have shrunk—in spite of its documented successes.

2. Establish a Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success to coordinate a statewide response, provide professional development, and help teacher preparation programs teach the Science of Reading.

The addition of this Center within the State Department of Education would sustain the work that began through the CK3LI and expand its reach by ensuring that the state's

future reading efforts are grounded in current, scientific knowledge about reading instruction.

3. Require Alliance District grant funds to be used within the targeted districts to fund their participation in CK3LI.

The Alliance District program is an investment by the state in its 33 lowest-performing public school districts, which serve over 200,000 students.^{xxix} Given that literacy is the foundational skill for a student’s academic future, the state should require that a portion of its investments are spent on research-based literacy strategies that are proven to work.

4. Adopt a Connecticut model curriculum for literacy so that districts seeking to improve outcomes—or participate in a CK3LI-aligned experience—can be self-starters.

The state should vocally endorse CK3LI and the Science of Reading and should provide resources that are aligned to these effective literacy instruction methods, as well as the Common Core State Standards. This includes providing districts with access to an aligned model curriculum (which should also be adaptable for remote learning from the outset).

5. Require all public school districts to report annually to the State Department of Education which literacy curricula and philosophies they employ in classrooms.

The state should encourage districts to adopt strategic literacy instruction methods that are thoughtfully implemented across schools. By asking districts to describe their literacy curricula and philosophies annually, the state can invite introspection on this issue. It can also begin to collect actionable data on how literacy is being taught statewide, and provide this important information to families.

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- ^{xi} Calculation made by averaging 3rd grade SBAC scores in ELA for all years that the test has been administered.
- ^{xii} Calculation made by subtracting the average SBAC score in ELA over all years it has been administered from 100%.
- ^{xiii} Calculation made by averaging 4th grade Reading scores in NAEP for the years 2015, 2017, and 2019.
- ^{xiv} Calculation made by subtracting the average NAEP score in Reading for the years 2015, 2017, and 2019 from 100%.
- ^{xv} ERN CT (2019). *Less for More: Low Rates of Completion and High Costs at Connecticut's Four Year Colleges*. Retrieved August 2020 at https://static.wixstatic.com/ugd/f618d8_8604bbcfad2d4319a7c8c0f2e20acc9c.pdf.
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- ^{xxi} Calculation made by averaging 3rd grade SBAC scores in ELA for students who were NOT eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch for all years that the test has been administered; and subtracting this total from 100%.
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About ERN CT:

The state chapter of a national organization, Education Reform Now CT is a 501(c)(3) that operates as a think tank and policy advocate, promoting great educational opportunities and achievement for all by increasing equity, protecting civil rights, and strengthening the social safety net.