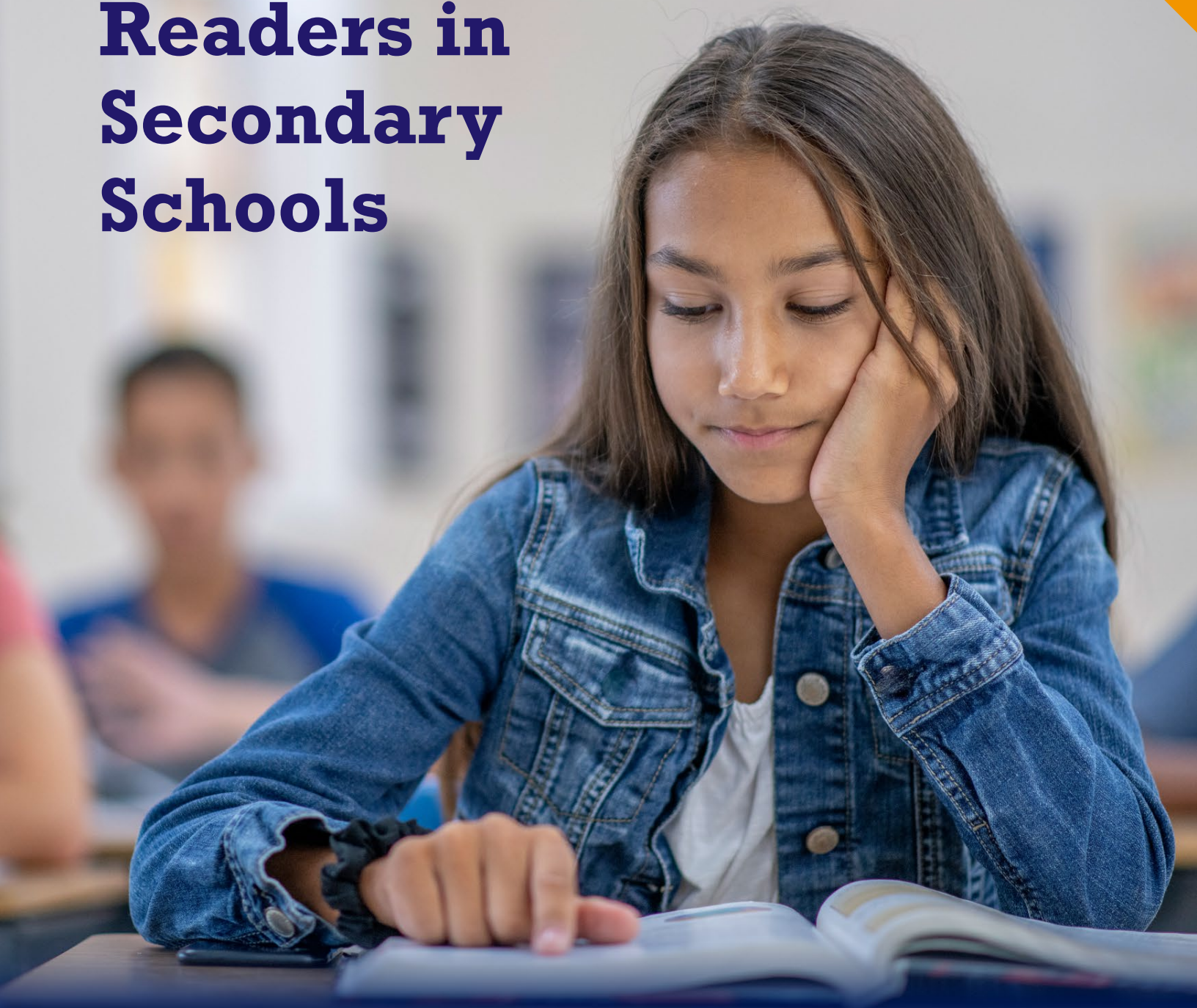


Struggling Readers in Secondary Schools



Introduction

Reading proficiency among older students remains a critical challenge in American education. While early literacy has received significant attention and resources, middle and high school students who struggle with basic reading skills may often fall through the cracks without additional support and instructional resources.

To better understand educators' views on this issue, the EdWeek Research Center surveyed 693 teachers, principals, and district leaders from September 24 through November 3, 2025. Only educators who said they work with secondary students on assignments that require reading were asked to respond to most of the survey questions examined in this report.

Results of the survey reveal broad concerns about secondary students' reading skills, particularly among educators working in higher-poverty school systems. Despite such widespread concerns, nearly 4 in 10 educators working with secondary students said they had not received any training on how to support middle and high school students with basic reading skills.

Educators in secondary schools most commonly pointed to students' lack of motivation to read assigned texts as the main reason they struggle. When asked about resources to support struggling middle and high school readers, the majority of survey respondents said their schools or districts provide dedicated intervention time for students to receive reading support (55%) and staff, such as reading interventionists, to work with struggling readers (51%). Tutoring during school hours (27%) or outside of them (29%) was less common.

In addition to resources provided by schools and districts, parental support can play a role in helping older students with reading challenges. More than 7 in 10 (72%) educators said they would like to see parents help in getting their children to read independently at home.

This report examines six key questions about educator perspectives on reading challenges and potential solutions for secondary students through charts highlighting key survey results.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

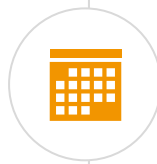


WHO

693 educators participated in this survey.

- **140** district leaders
- **89** principals
- **464** teachers

This analysis primarily examines responses from educators who said they work with secondary students on assignments that require reading.



WHEN

September 24 through November 3, 2025



WHAT

Nationally representative online survey



WHERE

Email invitations sent to an online survey

Unlock literacy success for every secondary student

With the right tools and training, teachers can help all students build academic language skills essential for succeeding in grade-level learning.



The 2024 National Association of Education Progress (NAEP) Report Card was a wake up call in America: Too many secondary students are challenged readers. The time for change is now.

You know better than anyone else: your secondary students are capable of so much more. And yet the percentage of students not reading proficiently at grade level hasn't budged in years.

And we know that teachers are feeling the pressure.

In a recent EdWeek survey, 38% of

educators said they are not receiving any training in how to instruct their secondary students who are reading below grade level—and another roughly 25% are trying to teach themselves.

Here's the truth: adolescent students are not facing just a comprehension problem.

The challenge is often an issue with recognizing and understanding multisyllable, academic vocabulary.

So how can we help secondary students build these skills?

“





A concerning number of secondary students are not reading at grade level—and the consequences are too serious to ignore. Secondary students must continue to master and consolidate the essential foundational skills of reading and strengthen their ability to decode and understand complex, multisyllabic words.”



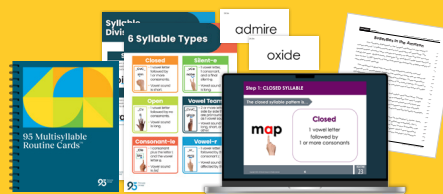
LAURA STEWART
Chief Academic Officer,
95 Percent Group

INTRODUCING

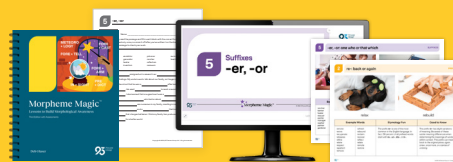
95 Adolescent Word Study Solution

-  Ready-to-use lessons
-  Turnkey, time-saving design
-  Flexible implementation options
-  Professional learning

The morphology and vocabulary components included in our new solution for secondary students are door openers in the middle and high school space—including the targeted professional learning that secondary teachers desperately need and want.



95 Multisyllable Routine Cards™ Package



Morpheme Magic™ 3rd Edition **NEW**

[Sample it today ▶](#)

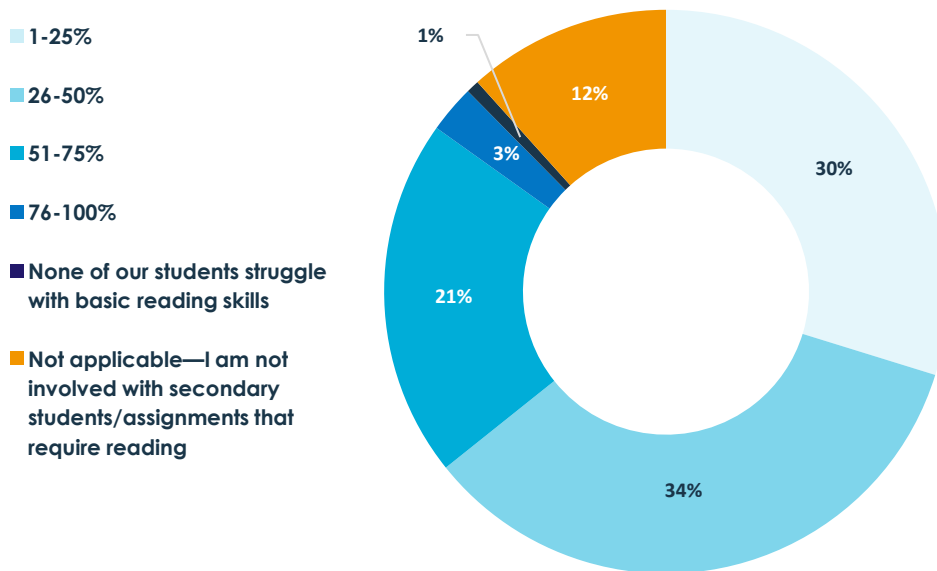


1. How widespread are reading struggles among older students?

The majority of educators report significant reading challenges among their middle and high school students. When asked to gauge the percentage of students struggling with basic reading skills in their schools or districts, 58% said that more than a quarter of their students face these difficulties. Nearly a quarter of educators reported that most of their students struggle.

Only 1% of educators said that none of their students struggle with basic reading skills.

What percentage of middle and high school students in your school/district struggle with basic reading skills?



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative September-November 2025 survey of 464 teachers, 89 principals, and 140 district leaders.

2. Is there a relationship between district poverty and reading challenges for secondary students?

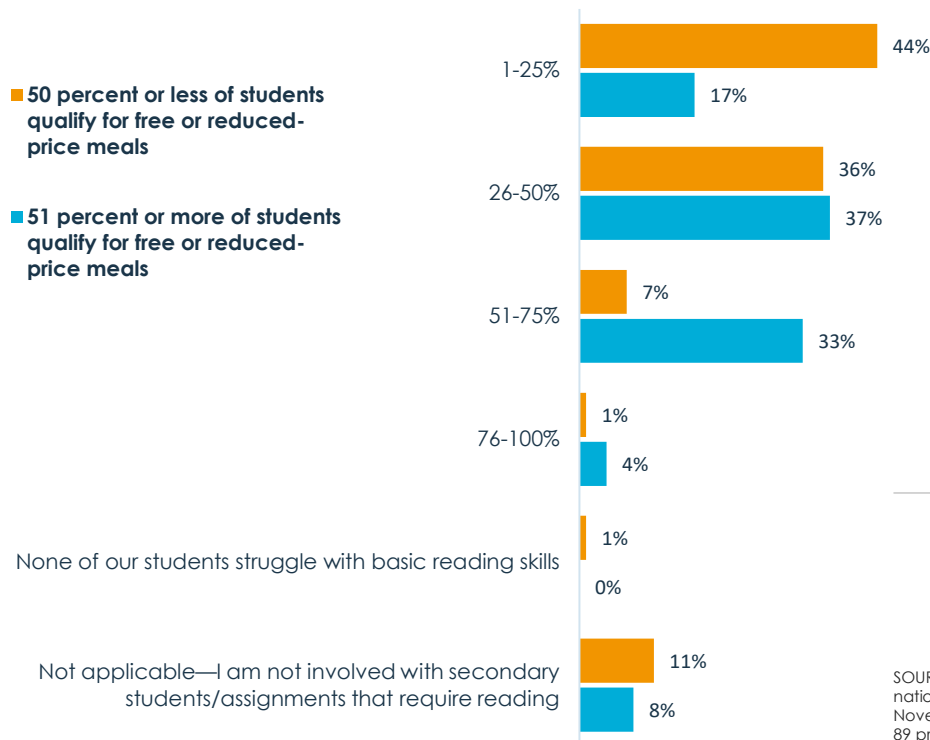
The relationship between poverty and the share of educators reporting that their secondary students face reading difficulties is stark. Educators working in higher-poverty school systems are more likely to say their students struggle than survey respondents serving more affluent communities.

In lower-poverty districts where smaller shares of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, 45% of educators report that one-quarter of students or less struggle with reading.

By contrast, in higher-poverty districts where more than half of students qualify for meal assistance, only 17% of educators said that share of students lacked basic reading skills.

Educators in higher-poverty school systems were more likely to indicate that the majority of their students have reading difficulties. Thirty-seven percent of educators in higher-poverty districts report that most of their students struggle with reading, compared to just 8% in lower-poverty systems.

What percentage of middle and high school students in your school/district struggle with basic reading skills?

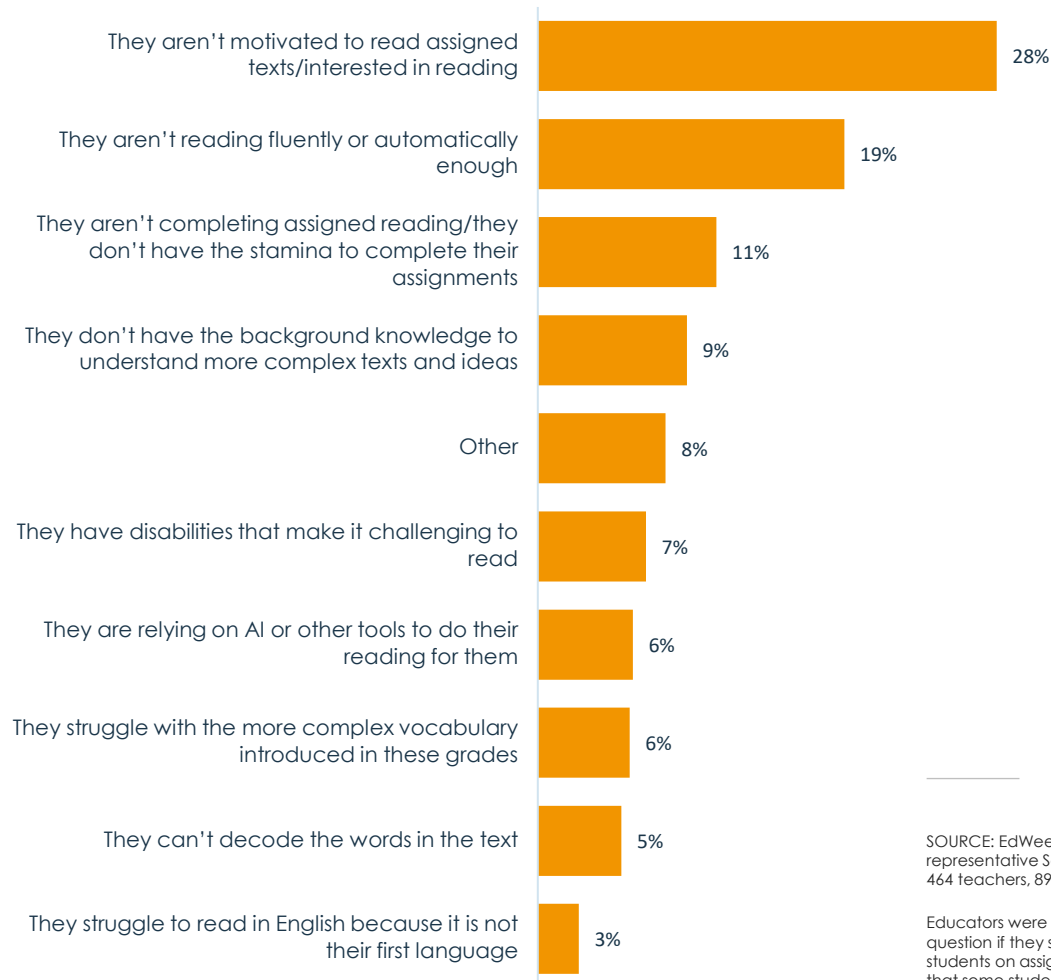


SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative September–November 2025 survey of 464 teachers, 89 principals, and 140 district leaders.

3. What do educators believe is the main reason that secondary students struggle with reading?

When asked to identify the primary reason that middle and high school students struggle with reading, student motivation emerged as the leading concern. More than one-quarter (28%) cited lack of motivation or interest in reading. Nearly one-fifth of educators (19%) said that students aren't reading fluently or automatically enough. Nearly one-fifth of educators (19%) said that students aren't reading fluently or automatically enough.

From your perspective, what is the MAIN reason that middle and high school students in your school/district struggle with basic reading skills?



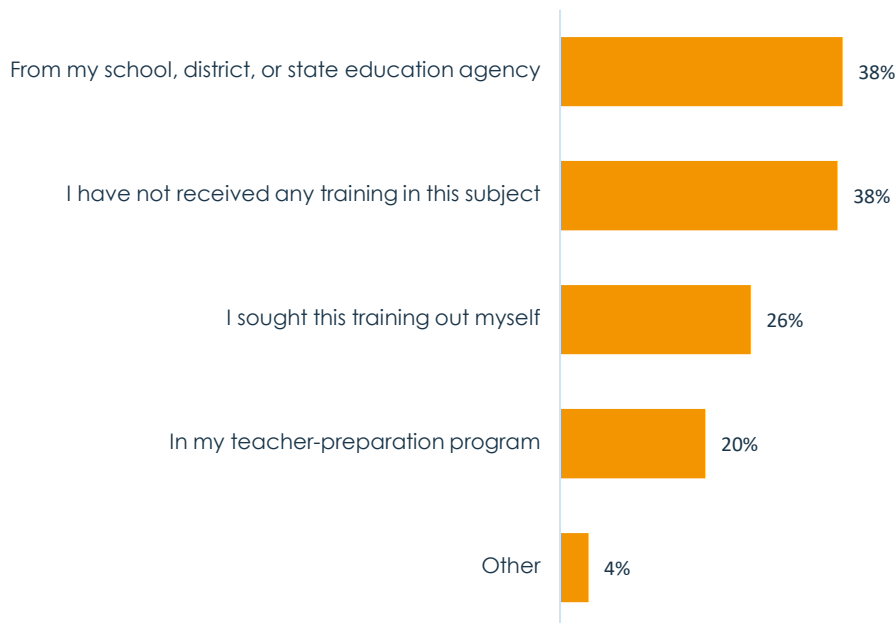
SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative September-November 2025 survey of 464 teachers, 89 principals, and 140 district leaders.

Educators were only asked to respond to this survey question if they said that they work with secondary students on assignments that require reading and that some students in their school or district struggle with basic reading skills.

4. Are educators trained to help struggling readers in secondary schools?

Despite widespread reading challenges, many educators lack adequate training to support struggling middle and high school readers. When asked where they received training on this topic, 38% of educators said they had not received any. Another 38% reported that they received training from their school, district, or state education agency and 26% sought training independently. Just 20% received this training during their teacher preparation programs.

Where have you received training in how to support middle and high school students who struggle with basic reading skills? Select all that apply.



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative September-November 2025 survey of 464 teachers, 89 principals, and 140 district leaders.

Only educators who said they work with secondary students on assignments that require reading were asked to respond to this survey question.

5. Which resources do schools and districts provide for struggling readers?

When educators were asked which resources their schools or districts provide to support struggling middle and high school readers, most survey respondents (92%) said that some supports were made available.

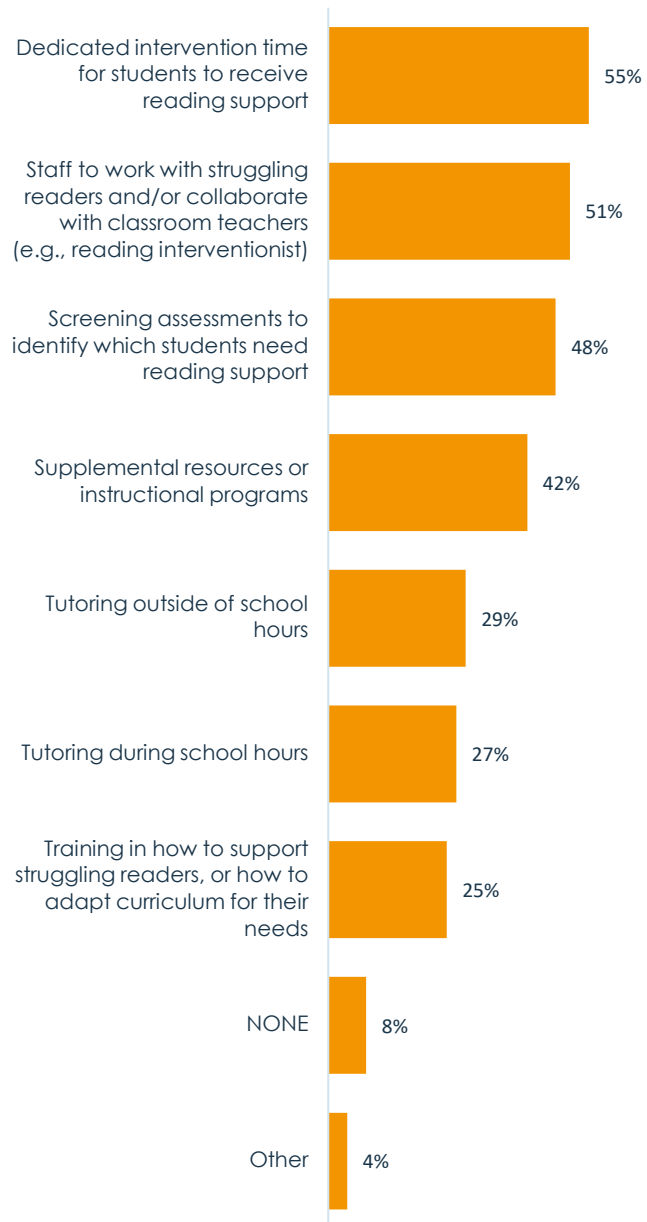
The most common resource is dedicated intervention time, reported by 55% of educators. Just over half (51%) said their schools or districts employ specialized staff such as reading interventionists, and 48% reported having screening assessments to identify students who need support.

Forty-two percent indicated their schools or school systems have supplemental instructional programs. However, tutoring appears to be less common, with 27% of respondents saying it's provided during school and 29% citing its availability outside school hours. Only 25% said their schools or districts provide training on how to support struggling readers.

SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative September-November 2025 survey of 464 teachers, 89 principals, and 140 district leaders.

Only educators who said they work with secondary students on assignments that require reading were asked to respond to this survey question.

Which resources does your school or district provide to support struggling middle and high school readers? Select all that apply.

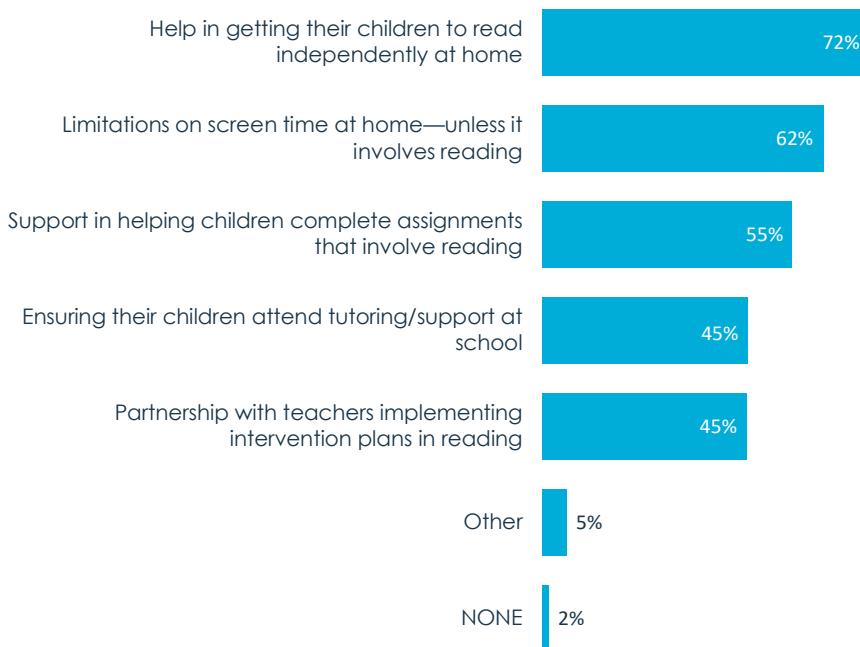


6. What kind of support do educators want to see from parents to help struggling readers?

Educators view parent involvement as critical to addressing reading challenges among older students. When asked what support they want from parents, responses revealed near-universal agreement that families must play an active role. Only 2% of educators said parental support is not needed.

Seventy-two percent of educators said they would like to see parents help in getting children to read independently at home. Sixty-two percent want parents to limit screen time unless it involves reading and 55% seek support in helping children complete assignments that involve reading.

What kind of support would you want to see from parents to help older students who struggle with reading? Select all that apply.



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative September-November 2025 survey of 464 teachers, 89 principals, and 140 district leaders.

Only educators who said they work with secondary students on assignments that require reading were asked to respond to this survey question.

Key Contributors



Holly Kurtz directs the EdWeek Research Center, which produces standalone studies as well as analyses for Education Week and special reports. Holly began working at Education Week in 2014 after earning a Ph.D. in 2013 from the University of Colorado at Boulder's School of Education and completing a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Colorado at Denver's School of Public Affairs. Prior to attending graduate school, she spent 11 years covering education and other topics for newspapers in Florida, Alabama, and Colorado.



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Alex Harwin is a quantitative research analyst for the EdWeek Research Center. They work on a wide variety of projects, from marquee annual reports to data-driven reporting in collaboration with the Education Week newsroom. Alex received an education at Stanford and UT, earning degrees in Sociology and policy analysis.



Elle Butler is a research analyst for the EdWeek Research Center. She is also a doctoral student in developmental psychology with a neuropsychology concentration at Howard University. Her research interests include the psychosocial development of Black youth and public policy interventions on youth recreational activities.

Why adolescent literacy can't wait

Insights and actions for school leaders and educators



LAURA STEWART
Chief Academic Officer,
95 Percent Group



Adolescent literacy is one of the most urgent priorities in education today.

In fact, in this November, 2025 [EdWeek article](#), the facilitators of an online conference on adolescent literacy said the overwhelming query

from teachers was, "What do I do when my [secondary] student is reading three or four grade levels behind?"

As the [2024 National Association of Educational Progress \(NAEP\) Report Card](#) revealed: only 30% of students in 8th grade and 35% of students in 12th grade are reading at a NAEP "proficient" level (NAEP, 2024).

We must act—and there are three priorities that need our attention.



ACTION 1

Prioritize both strong first instruction AND early intervention

It is imperative to address reading difficulties early through reliable and valid diagnostic data and targeted instruction, with a relentless focus on getting students on track as early as possible. This means not taking a "wait and see" approach and not continuing to move students with low levels of literacy through the system until there is a crisis moment. This requires us to take a dual approach:

A prevention-orientation with ALL of our novice readers AND an early-intervention-orientation with any students who need our support for as long as it takes. As long as there are students that don't have the necessary skills to read—no matter their age or grade—it's our responsibility to help them.

ACTION 2

Empower every teacher to be a reading teacher—leaders can and must support this

Every teacher must be a reading teacher. And those that are leading schools and districts need to understand why, and ensure professional learning is provided for all educators. The skills that secondary students require to be successful across all subject areas hinge on their ability to decode and decipher multisyllable academic vocabulary and deeply understand complex text across domains.

Every teacher will have students they need to support in reading—therefore we must ensure every teacher

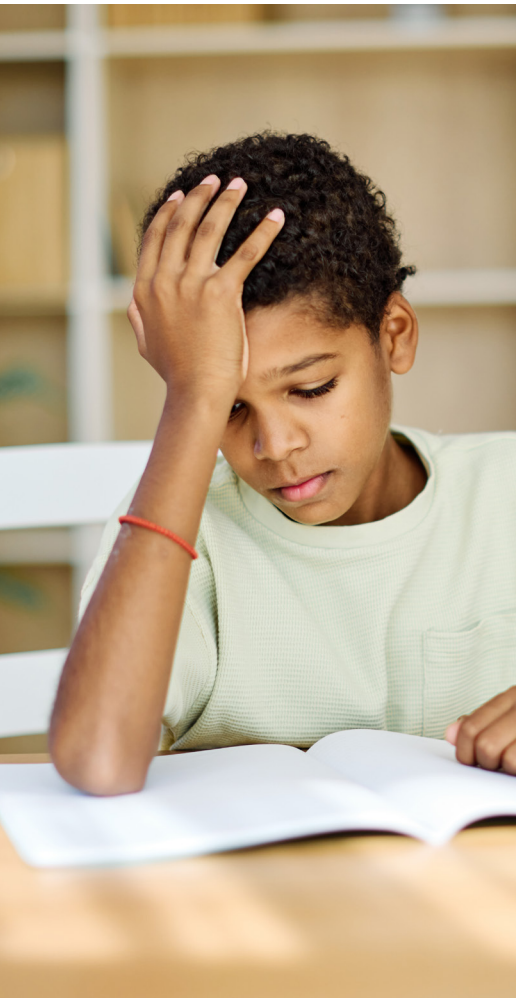
understands how reading develops, how instruction needs to support reading development, what happens when things go wrong, and how to remediate when it does.

And knowledge is just the beginning. Without it, our practices aren't examined, and without examination, we can't work to change them. Leaders are uniquely poised to lead through not only these individual changes, but also the all-important system changes that will sustain literacy transformation.

ACTION 3

Collaborate for change: We are all in this together

And finally, we can no longer stay in our silos in our schools—elementary, secondary, and content area teachers—and in the sciences—learning, teaching, reading, and implementation. In order to move the needle, we must all be in this together. Because ALL of our students deserve the very best practices in order to ensure they can thrive as literate citizens of the 21st century. It is the promise we make to them and to our communities. And all means ALL.



The urgency of adolescent literacy: The evidence-based roadmap so ALL students can learn to read



JEANNE SCHOPF
MEd, NBCT, C-SLDI

It was my first day providing reading intervention to eighth graders. As I reviewed the class roster over the summer, one name stood out: Adrian. I had heard stories about him for years. Just the previous year, he had thrown a computer across the room during reading intervention. Colleagues described him as angry and disruptive.

When Adrian entered my classroom, hood up, face buried in his jacket, it was clear he

did not want to be there. For several days, he remained disengaged, silent, and withdrawn. Then, one day, he got up and walked out of the classroom. Twenty minutes later, a building leader brought him back. Adrian's actions communicated what words hadn't: he wanted out.

I knew it would take time and trust to help Adrian see himself as a capable reader. I began by explaining to the class how the

brain learns to read and shared a truth too few students have heard: many of them simply had never been taught how to read, and it wasn't their fault. As I said those words, Adrian slowly removed his hood and looked at me with intense eyes. In that moment, I saw something: a light dimmed by years of frustration, but still flickering with hope.

When I introduced phonics through word chaining, Adrian started to engage, quietly at first, then with more confidence. Each day, he showed up with a little more openness. He began leaving his hood off and leaning into the lessons. By the end of the month, he was reading aloud. By the end of the semester, he was volunteering. One day, he asked me, "Do I have to take a reading class next year? My reading has gotten so much better."

How to help underserved adolescent readers and why it matters to get it right

Adrian represents far too many adolescent readers who are left behind—angry and

disillusioned because they were never taught how to read. According to the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 30% of eighth graders scored at or above the proficient level in reading, the lowest percentage since the assessment began tracking results in 1992 (NAEP, 2024). This means that a significant number of students in middle and high school still lack foundational reading skills.

Research shows that students who struggle with reading are four times more likely to drop out of school. For those who do graduate, the consequences of unfinished reading development are still profound. Limited reading proficiency is linked to academic challenges in higher education, restricted career opportunities, low self-confidence, and reduced motivation (Hernandez, 2011).

The long-term outcomes are dramatic. As the National Institute for Literacy reported, "Adults with low literacy skills are twice as likely to be unemployed and are more likely to live below the poverty line" (NIL, 2008). Even more troubling, the U.S. Department of Education found that approximately 75% of

state prison inmates did not complete high school or are classified as low literate (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

So what must educators and school leaders do to change this trajectory?

We must commit to implementing explicit, evidence-based instructional practices within a supportive system. This includes reliable assessments, progress monitoring, and targeted interventions. It is our responsibility to ensure our students graduate not only with a diploma but with the literacy skills needed to thrive in college, career, and life.

Supporting the unique needs of adolescent readers

In early elementary, reading instruction focuses on decoding. In upper elementary, the focus shifts more to comprehension. By middle and high school, there is an expectation that students have learned to read. However, according to the 2024 NAEP fourth-grade scores, only 31% perform at or above proficient, with nearly 40% below basic—the highest rate of low performance since 2002 (NCES, 2024).

Research shows that about 95% of students can learn to read with effective, evidence-based instruction (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2012). Reid Lyon found that, "Of the 70% of children who struggle, 95% of those children are 'instructional casualties,'" meaning difficulties result from inadequate instruction rather than learning disabilities (Lyon, 2001).

Our disengaged adolescents are not simply "unmotivated" or "unsupported"—they have not been taught how to read. When secondary leaders and teachers provide evidence-based practices and interventions, 95% or more of students can graduate as readers.



Evidence-based instructional practices to improve adolescent reading

Literacy is not limited to reading and writing in English Language Arts (ELA) classes; it is crucial for students to develop the skills necessary to comprehend and communicate effectively in every subject area, such as math, science, and social studies. All educators need to recognize their role as literacy teachers and help students develop the ability to read, analyze, and synthesize information skills critical for college and career readiness.

When educators embrace their role as literacy instructors, they contribute to supporting students across the entire school. They recognize that literacy is foundational to success in college, careers, and life; it is the key to navigating the complexities of the modern world.

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) published the IES Practice Guide, a comprehensive guide for improving adolescent literacy, based on a thorough review of over 100 research studies examining evidence-based practices that have been shown to improve literacy outcomes for adolescents. It highlights practices that can be implemented in all classrooms.

First, the guide encourages educators and leaders to assist adolescent students in improving their decoding and language skills. It emphasizes the importance of providing individualized interventions which trained specialists can implement for readers needing support.

- Interventions should be explicit, systematic, and data-driven, based on ongoing assessments of student needs.
- Interventions should address foundational reading skills, including



decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

In addition, the two practices with the most substantial evidence that will improve language comprehension are:

1. Provide explicit vocabulary instruction.
2. Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction.

In providing explicit vocabulary instruction, the IES guide emphasizes the importance of directly teaching high-utility words, particularly those essential for understanding complex texts across various subject areas.

- Teach high-utility words directly, especially those needed for complex texts.
- Provide repeated exposure and active use (speaking and writing).
- Teach strategies like analyzing word parts and using context clues.

For direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction, the IES guide recommends that educators teach students

specific, research-backed strategies which include summarizing, making predictions, asking questions, and visualizing to enhance understanding of texts. Instruction should:

- Prioritize specific modeling strategies such as summarizing, predicting, questioning, and visualizing.
- Give students frequent practice, feedback, and support in applying these strategies independently.
- Encourage students to monitor their comprehension and adjust their strategy as necessary.

Identification of readers with unfinished learning is crucial, and evidence-based instruction should be employed to address their challenges. Interventions should be intensive, systematic, and regularly monitored to ensure students are making progress and improving their reading abilities (Institute of Education Sciences, 2008).

The IES Practice Guide can be accessed [here](#).

Assessing and monitoring of student progress

To provide the necessary interventions for adolescent readers, schools find the most success in implementing a robust Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework that offers multiple layers of support, grounded in evidence-based practices such as screening tools, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring, and data-driven decision-making protocols involving all stakeholders within the school community. According to the American Institutes for Research (AIR), effective MTSS implementation in secondary schools centers on these essential components, with a particular emphasis on assessment and progress monitoring (AIR, 2020):

1. Establish a Universal Screening Assessment for grades 6-12 and administer 3x a year to identify students who may require additional academic, behavioral, or social-emotional support.
2. Once at-risk students are identified, schools should utilize targeted diagnostic tools to pinpoint specific skill deficits, which can then be addressed

systematically and explicitly through a tiered intervention approach

3. Students identified as requiring Tier 2 intervention should receive a standardized, evidence-based program targeting skill gaps within a small-group setting. Implement Tier 3 interventions for students requiring more intensive support which, according to AIR, involve data-based individualization (DBI).
4. Establish a system for progress monitoring to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. AIR recommends that students receiving Tier 2 interventions should be progress monitored monthly, while those in Tier 3 should be monitored weekly.

An MTSS model for secondary students

AIR's MTSS model for secondary schools makes these recommendations:

- Place students in Tiers based on a comprehensive review of various data sources, including universal screening, grades, attendance, teacher

observations, previous intervention data, diagnostic assessments, and ongoing progress monitoring results.

- The MTSS team should make decisions collaboratively, reviewing multiple data points and adjusting tier placements based on student responsiveness to the interventions
- Create a balanced and dynamic system, forming part of a responsive education framework where supports are continuously adjusted to meet students' evolving needs.

Creating a success roadmap for adolescent readers takes time and ongoing effort

Adrian entered my class angry and defeated, exhausted by years of ineffective intervention. With structured literacy instruction—based in the science of reading—he began to grow and truly feel the confidence that comes with foundational reading skills.

Unfortunately, when he moved up to high school, Adrian did not continue to receive the support he needed in order to progress along the success roadmap begun during his 8th grade year—a reality for far too many adolescents. NAEP data confirms the urgency: only 35% of twelfth graders read at or above proficiency.

We have the knowledge and tools to change this trajectory. Now we must act.

