



New York Campaign for Early Literacy

Early Literacy in the Earliest Years

“Early literacy (reading and writing) does not mean early reading instruction or teaching babies to read; it is the natural development of skills through the enjoyment of books, the importance of positive interactions between babies and parents, and the critical role of literacy-rich experiences.” – American Library Association

Introduction

New York State [ranks 37th in the nation](#) in fourth grade reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and only 38% of Black and 35% of Latinx third grade students scored proficient on the 2022-23 [ELA state assessment](#). These student outcomes have significant implications for New York students and communities, negatively impacting graduation rates, employment, poverty reduction, public safety, and health.

To help address this literacy crisis, EdTrust-New York launched the New York Campaign for Early Literacy, one of the few efforts in the country that employs a birth to age eight approach that brings together early childhood providers, educators, families, community partners, and schools to increase reading proficiency by third grade. A focus on literacy in a child’s earliest years is imperative to ensuring all students have access to early literacy opportunities, as well as achieving New York’s goal to cut childhood poverty in half this decade.

The Link Between Early Brain Development and Early Literacy

[Eighty percent](#) of brain development occurs in the first 1,000 days—the first three years—of a child’s life, and 90% occurs by age five. During this time, the prefrontal cortex—responsible for decision-making, judgement, planning, and all executive function—evolves. However, prefrontal cortex development can also be hindered by specific Adverse Childhood Experiences such as abuse and neglect, as well as systemic issues like poverty and racism. For example, children experiencing hunger [have scored lower](#) on vocabulary and word recognition, which negatively impacts their kindergarten readiness.

Adverse Child Experiences are decreased by [protective factors](#) and strong, nurturing bonds between parents/caregivers and their infants/toddlers are especially important. Strong maternal mental health, in particular, promotes bonding and healthy social-emotional development. Conversely, maternal stress can raise cortisol levels and affect a child’s stress response, making concentration and learning difficult. A lack of culturally-responsive

prenatal and postpartum care can affect both health outcomes and critical milestones like language development.

Language Development

Language development starts with understanding and responding to the sounds that make up words, and includes interaction with signs, symbols, and written materials. For our youngest learners, this could include pointing at pictures or even chewing on a book. Another critical component of language development is “serve and return,” the back-and-forth process that happens when a caregiver and child interact, creating a safe, secure, and nurturing environment. A baby’s nonverbal cues, such as listening and eye contact, are their language and when a caregiver responds, they are setting the foundation for future literacy development.

Emergent Literacy

The next stage of development, emergent or pre-literacy, is [defined](#) as “those behaviors shown by very young children as they begin to respond to and approximate reading and writing acts... (encompassing) the interrelatedness of language: speaking, listening, reading, writing, and viewing.” The development of oral vocabulary, listening comprehension skills, understanding of the basic principles of the alphabet, and the ability to recognize sounds in words are some of the greatest predictors of a child’s future reading ability. An [American Library Association study](#) found that three- to five-year-olds who were read to at least three times a week were twice as likely to recognize all letters, have word-sight recognition, and understand words in context.

Preparing a young child to become a strong reader also includes a focus on social and emotional development. When adults or older children engage a young child with a book, they help build the child’s attention skills while also fostering empathy and the ability to acknowledge and relate to multiple perspectives.

Recommendations: To ensure that New York provides our youngest learners with a strong foundation that prepares them for success in school, we recommend support of the following policy priorities:

- **Implement instructional best practices for Pre-K that include measuring the development of cognitive abilities, including executive function skills and social-emotional learning.** The Right to Read bill New York passed this year incorporates that language, which focuses on specific skills that research has shown to predict future reading proficiency and kindergarten readiness. Districts and schools should develop and implement these best practices based on the [Core Body of Knowledge](#), which explains and supports “the cycle of observation and assessment that must

inform curriculum planning and evaluation of educational goals for children and programs”.

- **Implement a comprehensive approach to early literacy.** For a child to achieve reading proficiency by third grade, we must invest not only in appropriate curricula and assessments, but in the social supports that strengthen families, beginning at birth. This includes connecting families to books and services that support early literacy practices. To support this comprehensive approach to early literacy, we recommend that state leaders:
 - **Expand and connect existing successful pilot programs, including Healthy Steps, Reach Out and Read, Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, and Talk, Read, Sing.** Due to a variety of constraints, only 37% of parents read to their baby every day. The American Academy of Pediatrics [recommends](#) that pediatric providers promote early literacy development for children aged 0-5 through five key strategies, including providing books to families during pediatric visits. By providing caregivers and parents with clear information and resources on the importance of reading to and talking with their child, we can help them make the most of early developmental opportunities. These complementary programs should be expanded statewide, focusing on efficiency and avoiding duplication.
 - **Increase funding for ParentChild+**, which trains home visitors to ensure families and home-based child care providers have access to information and materials to build social-emotional and cognitive skills. This program also provides critical exposure to early language through books and other learning materials that can be explored together. ParentChild+ currently operates in seven counties across New York and should expand statewide.
- **Adopt the Early Intervention (EI) Reform Bill**, which would direct the Department of Health to study how EI reimbursement rates are determined, as well as what changes need to be made to the system. [Research demonstrates](#) that limited vocabulary knowledge at 24 and 48 months is predictive of later school readiness. Children who receive EI services [achieve better outcomes](#) in cognitive, language, and motor development while enhancing social-emotional skills, school readiness, and family relationships. Recruiting and retaining EI practitioners with training and qualifications to address developmental and speech delays, [can reduce the need](#) for later supports and services.
- **Invest in professional development and training for in-service child care providers/educators and prospective educators in early childhood educator**

preparation programs to support providers and educators to create ongoing opportunities for adult-child and child-child conversations, independent and adult-led exploration of culturally diverse books, and initiation of songs and rhyming games that create awareness of letters and sounds. By training in-service and prospective providers and educators, we can ensure they are prepared to implement culturally-responsive, developmentally-appropriate curricula and practices in the classroom.

- **Develop local transition teams to strengthen the transition from early learning programs (Pre-K or child care) to kindergarten.** These teams can help kindergarten programs support each child's unique developmental trajectory during this critical period of brain development. The New York State Education Department recently created a Kindergarten Transition Toolkit designed to support children and their families leading up to the first day of school and throughout that first year. This effort should continue to be strengthened.
- **Assist early learning programs in supporting bilingual families** by providing learning materials and family resources in multiple languages, and by hiring bilingual providers and educators. [Studies](#) show that, when listening to language sounds, children who are bilingual have higher activity in the prefrontal cortex of the brain. As a result, bilingual children have been shown to have better executive functioning skills, better working memory, and an increased ability to move between tasks, think flexibly, focus their attention, and filter distractions. One study even found that bilingual children showed an improved ability to see others' perspectives as compared to monolingual peers.
- **Improve efforts to identify and support parents with limited literacy skills.** This can be done by connecting them to adult education and community-led initiatives such as [Literacy Volunteers](#). Additionally, a two-generation approach, like that employed by ParentChild+, can build family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with children and the adults in their lives together. Finally, providing books in the home in multiple languages can strengthen not only the literacy skills of children, but those of their parents. This approach is supported by [research](#) from Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which found that:
 - multiple members of families use and benefit from the provided books;
 - families take great pride in building their home libraries;
 - families strongly associate reading with learning and academic success; and
 - families build traditions and routines around reading.

For more information about the New York Campaign for Early Literacy and early childhood education, please contact Jenn O'Connor at joconnor@edtrustny.org.

