

Third-Grade Reading Skills

DEFINITION

Third-grade reading skills is the percentage of third-grade students who met expectations in English language arts on the *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS)* test.

SIGNIFICANCE

Educators and researchers have long recognized the importance of achieving reading proficiency by the end of third grade, when children begin to shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Students who do not successfully reach this milestone struggle in the later grades and are four times more likely to drop out of high school than their proficient peers.¹ Interventions for students who struggle with reading are more successful when implemented before third grade and when they are culturally relevant. When intervention is delayed until after third grade, most children never catch up to their grade-level peers.^{2,3,4}

Literacy begins long before children encounter school instruction in writing and reading. Physical and social-emotional health, family supports, literacy-rich home environments (including telling stories) and parents who provide early cognitive development activities contribute to literacy development, reading achievement, and success in school.^{5,6}

High-quality preschool and pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) programs can boost language and literacy skills and have the greatest impact on children living in or near poverty.⁷ Programs targeting the development of social-emotional and behavioral skills improve children's school readiness and academic achievement. Children who participate in high-quality Pre-K programs score higher on future reading and math assessments, are more likely to become proficient readers in the primary grades, and have higher graduation rates.^{8,9}

Policymakers can increase third-grade reading proficiency by increasing access to high-quality child care, Pre-K, and Head Start; providing parents with supports to create enriched language and literacy opportunities beginning at birth; expanding access to high-quality summer learning programs; and addressing chronic early absence.^{10,11}

4th-Grade NAEP Reading Proficiency		
	2009	2019
RI	36%	35%
US	32%	34%
National Rank*	24th	
New England Rank**	6th	

*1st is best; 50th is worst

**1st is best; 6th is worst

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, datacenter.kidscount.org

The *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)* measures proficiency nationally and across states every other year for grades 4 and 8.



Third Graders Meeting Expectations on the RICAS English Language Arts Assessment, Rhode Island, 2021

SUBGROUP	
Female Students	46%
Male Students	35%
Multilingual Learners/English Learners	12%
Non-English Learners	45%
Students Receiving Special Education Services	12%
Students Not Receiving Special Education Services	46%
Low-Income Students	23%
Higher-Income Students	56%
Asian Students+	53%
Black Students	24%
Hispanic Students	23%
Native American Students	26%
White Students	52%
Homeless Students	15%
Students in Foster Care	24%
ALL STUDENTS	40%

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS)*, 2020-2021. Low-income status is determined by eligibility for the free or reduced-price lunch program. +Data for Asian students is not disaggregated by ethnic group. National research shows large academic disparities across Asian ethnic groups.

◆ In Rhode Island in 2021, 40% of third graders met expectations on the *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS)*, English language arts assessment. Twenty-three percent of low-income third graders met expectations, compared with 56% of higher-income third graders. There were also large disparities by race and ethnicity as well as by language status and special education status. Fifteen percent of third graders who were identified as homeless met expectations in English language arts, compared to 41% of third graders who were not identified as homeless.¹²

◆ In 2021, 24% of third graders who were in foster care met expectations in English language arts compared to 40% of students who were not in foster care.¹³

◆ In the U.S., 75% of teachers working with early readers used some methods not backed by research to teach reading. Evidence-based instructional techniques can help children with reading disabilities acquire proficiency in reading.¹⁴

Table 47. Third-Grade Reading Skills, Rhode Island, 2019 & 2021

SCHOOL DISTRICT	# OF THIRD GRADERS TESTED 2021	% MEETING EXPECTATIONS 2019	% MEETING EXPECTATIONS 2021
Barrington	229	73%	69%
Bristol Warren	200	61%	58%
Burrillville	132	39%	30%
Central Falls	169	26%	14%
Chariho	183	75%	59%
Coventry	264	64%	57%
Cranston	652	55%	39%
Cumberland	317	65%	62%
East Greenwich	172	73%	76%
East Providence	305	55%	39%
Exeter-West Greenwich	114	55%	50%
Foster	32	44%	50%
Glocester	84	71%	73%
Jamestown	55	82%	82%
Johnston	217	44%	38%
Lincoln	189	67%	49%
Little Compton	23	58%	78%
Middletown	150	46%	48%
Narragansett	59	64%	71%
New Shoreham	11	73%	45%
Newport	123	27%	27%
North Kingstown	215	63%	65%
North Providence	230	45%	36%
North Smithfield	110	70%	53%
Pawtucket	596	37%	25%
Portsmouth	161	55%	54%
Providence	1,484	26%	19%
Scituate	82	70%	59%
Smithfield	153	62%	67%
South Kingstown	178	67%	60%
Tiverton	123	63%	62%
Warwick	531	51%	46%
West Warwick	212	40%	26%
Westerly	159	59%	42%
Woonsocket	381	18%	16%
Charter Schools	772	53%	36%
Four Core Cities	2,630	27%	19%
Remainder of State	5,666	57%	51%
Rhode Island	9,068	48%	40%

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Data are from the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS)*, 2018-2019 and 2020-2021 school years and are rounded to the nearest percentage point.

The *RICAS* test was not administered in 2020 due to COVID-19.

Due to the adoption of a new assessment tool by RIDE in 2018, Third-Grade Reading Skills cannot be compared with Factbooks prior to 2018. In Rhode Island in 2021, 92% of students were tested. Response rates vary by district. Due to low participation rates, *Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS)*, 2020-2021 reading scores cannot be compared to previous years.

% meeting expectations are the third-grade students who met or exceeded expectations for their grade on the English language arts section of the *RICAS*. Only students who actually took the test are counted in the denominator for the district and school proficiency rates. Students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) may participate in alternate assessments instead. Multilingual Learners/English Learners in the U.S. less than one year are exempt from the English language arts assessment.

2021 *RICAS* data for independent charter schools include Achievement First Rhode Island, Blackstone Valley Prep, The Compass School, Paul Cuffee Charter School, Highlander Charter School, The Hope Academy, International Charter School, Kingston Hill Academy, The Learning Community, RISE Prep Mayoral Academy, Segue Institute for Learning, and SouthSide Charter School. Charter schools included in total differ by year, depending on the schools serving that grade level on the year of the test. Charter schools are not included in the four core cities and remainder of state calculations.

Core cities are Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

Data is not reported for The Rhode Island School for the Deaf because the number of students tested was less than 10. These students are still counted in the remainder of the state and state totals.

See Methodology Section for more information.

(References are on page 189)

COVID-19 and Grade-Level Reading

◆ School closures and the combination of distance learning and hybrid models have resulted in significant learning loss, especially among low-income students, Multilingual Learners, students receiving special education services and Students of Color.¹⁵

◆ The *American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)* of 2021 provided funding to states and school districts to reopen schools safely, maximize in-person instruction, and address the impact of the pandemic on students, families, and educators. At least 20% of funds must be used for evidence-based interventions that respond to students' social, emotional, and academic needs and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Students of Color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, Multilingual Learners, students experiencing homelessness, and students in foster care.¹⁶

◆ Assessments and early-warning systems can help identify students most at risk for learning loss.¹⁷

◆ It is critical for students to continue to be instructed in grade-level content that is scaffolded with supports. Using materials below grade-level can reinforce low expectations and exacerbate disparities in grade-level reading.¹⁸