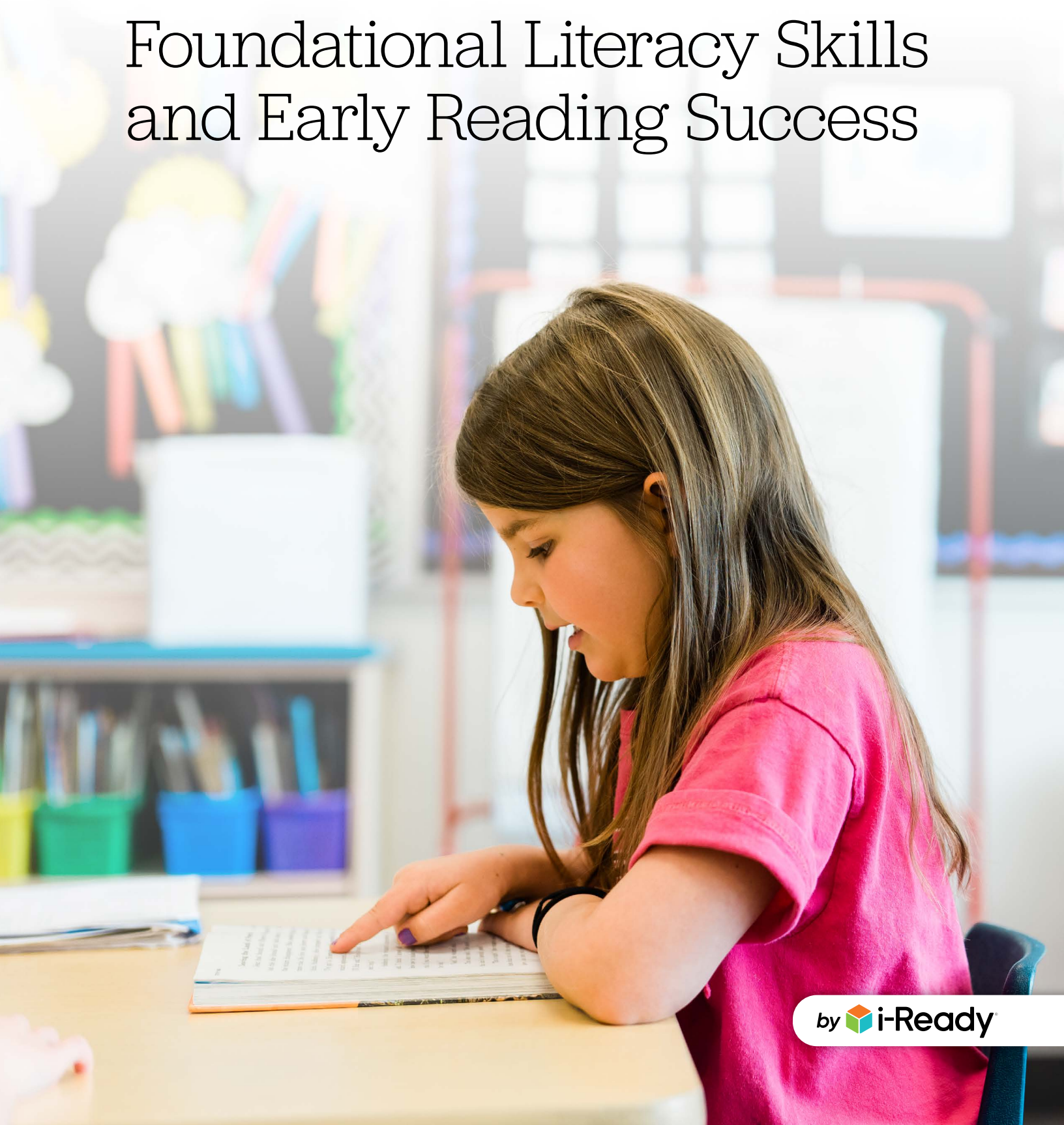
Whitepaper

Foundational Literacy Skills and Early Reading Success



by i-Ready

Overview

Today, students in classrooms across the country are still needing support with reading. While this was likely worsened by the pandemic (Mervosh, 2022), educators and academics were calling attention to a national reading crisis (Myracle et al., 2019) long before the pandemic arrived.

The good news is that we know how to fix this.

The Science of Reading (Schwartz & Sparks, 2019), a trusted body of evidence from more than six decades of reading research, has given us a recipe for effectively teaching children how to read—and it begins with early literacy instruction.

The Importance of Early Literacy Achievement

From the Science of Reading, we know that learning to read is a complex process involving word recognition, language comprehension, listening comprehension, and self-regulatory behaviors (Cervetti et al., 2020; Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Teaching phonics skills explicitly and systematically is necessary for most students to move on to reading fluently and with comprehension. Without the fundamentals of phonics skills in place, students will continue to need support with reading.

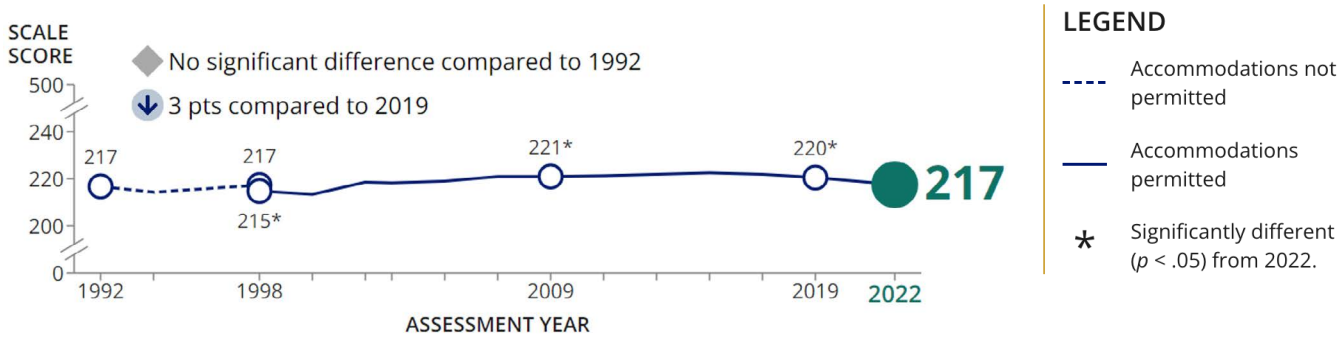
Reading by Grade 3 has been cited as a "make-or-break" benchmark in a child's educational trajectory, with Grade 3 reading proficiency highly correlating to high school graduation rates (Fiester, 2010; Hernandez, 2011).

- When students learn how to read on grade level by the end of Grade 3, they are much more likely to graduate from high school, which in turn is related to higher earning potential.
- If students are not able to read on grade level by the end of Grade 3, they are more likely to have behavioral and social problems in school and are less likely to graduate from high school, which adversely impacts their future earning potential (Center for Public Education, 2015).

National Reading Achievement Has Fallen

According to the Nation's Report Card, Grade 4 reading scores fell after the pandemic (Schwartz, 2022). For example, Grade 4 reading scores were lower in 2022 than in 2019 and comparable to the initial scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 1992. See Figure 1.

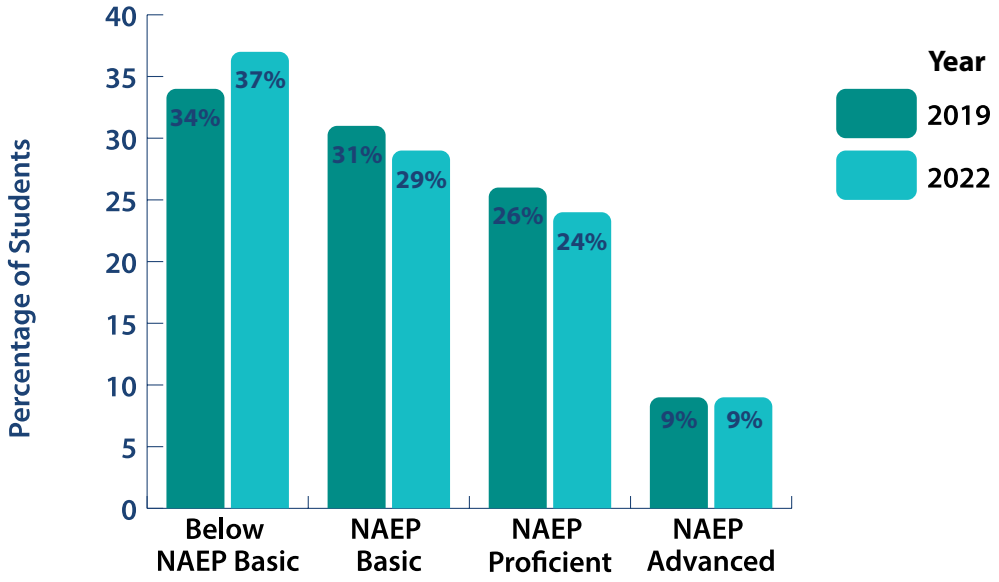
Figure 1: Trend in Grade 4 Reading Average Scores



In terms of practical significance, more than one-third (i.e., 37%) of Grade 4 students performed below NAEP Basic in reading, which was an increase of three percentage points from 2019 (i.e., 34%). See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Trend in Grade 4 NAEP Reading Achievement-Level Results

More than one-third (i.e., 37%) of Grade 4 students performed below NAEP Basic in reading, which was an increase of three percentage points from 2019 (i.e., 34%).



We Need a Focused Strategy to Help Teachers

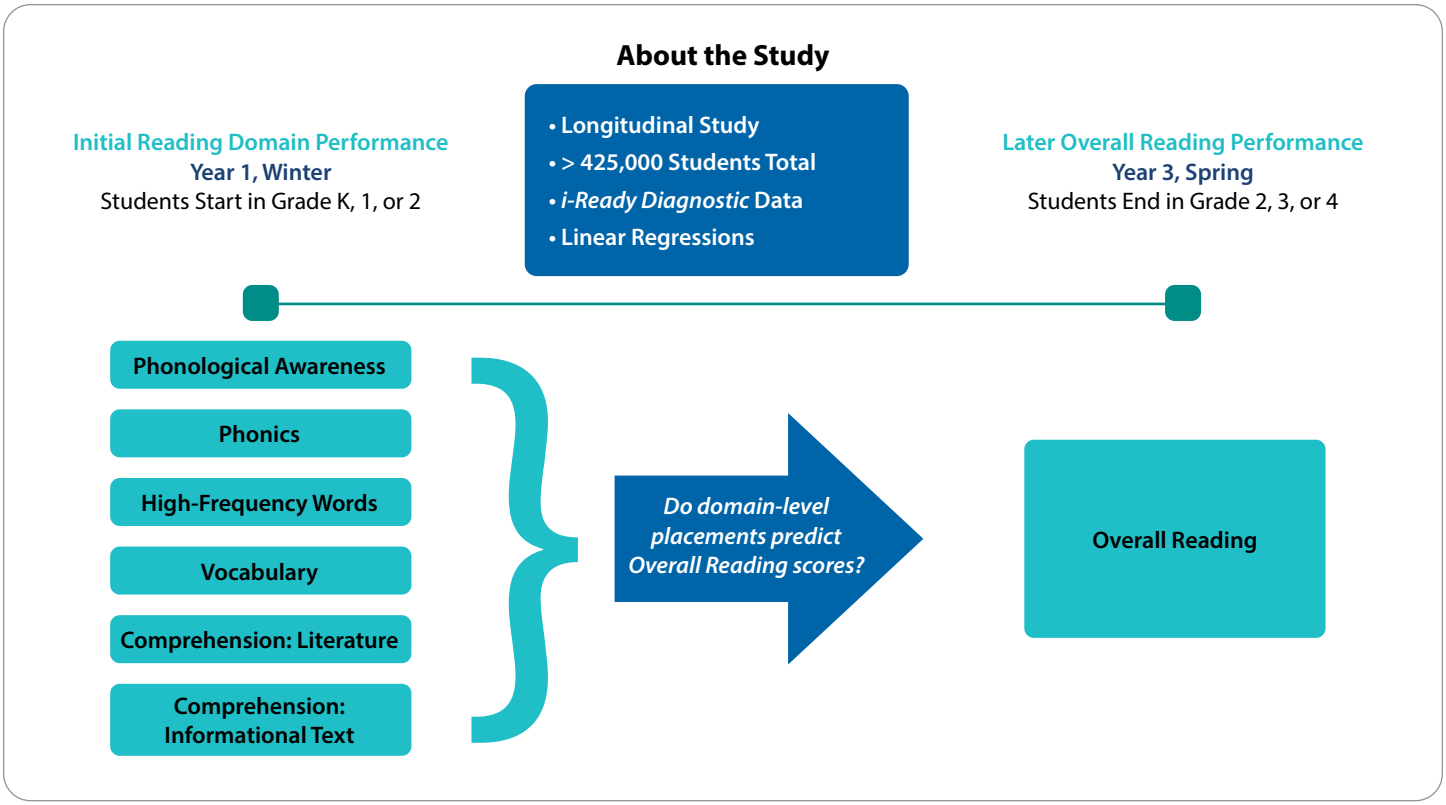
With the magnitude of unfinished learning across grades, subjects, and domains (Curriculum Associates, 2022) following the pandemic, a "fix everything and focus everywhere" approach is not a viable one for any given classroom teacher, building leader, or district administrator. Of the five essential components at the core of every effective reading instruction program (i.e., phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension), phonological awareness and phonics are truly the foundation on which the rest of the reading house is built.

As such, teaching foundational reading skills to our youngest students is the best place to start, as that is likely to have the most profound and long-lasting impact on a student's academic trajectories.

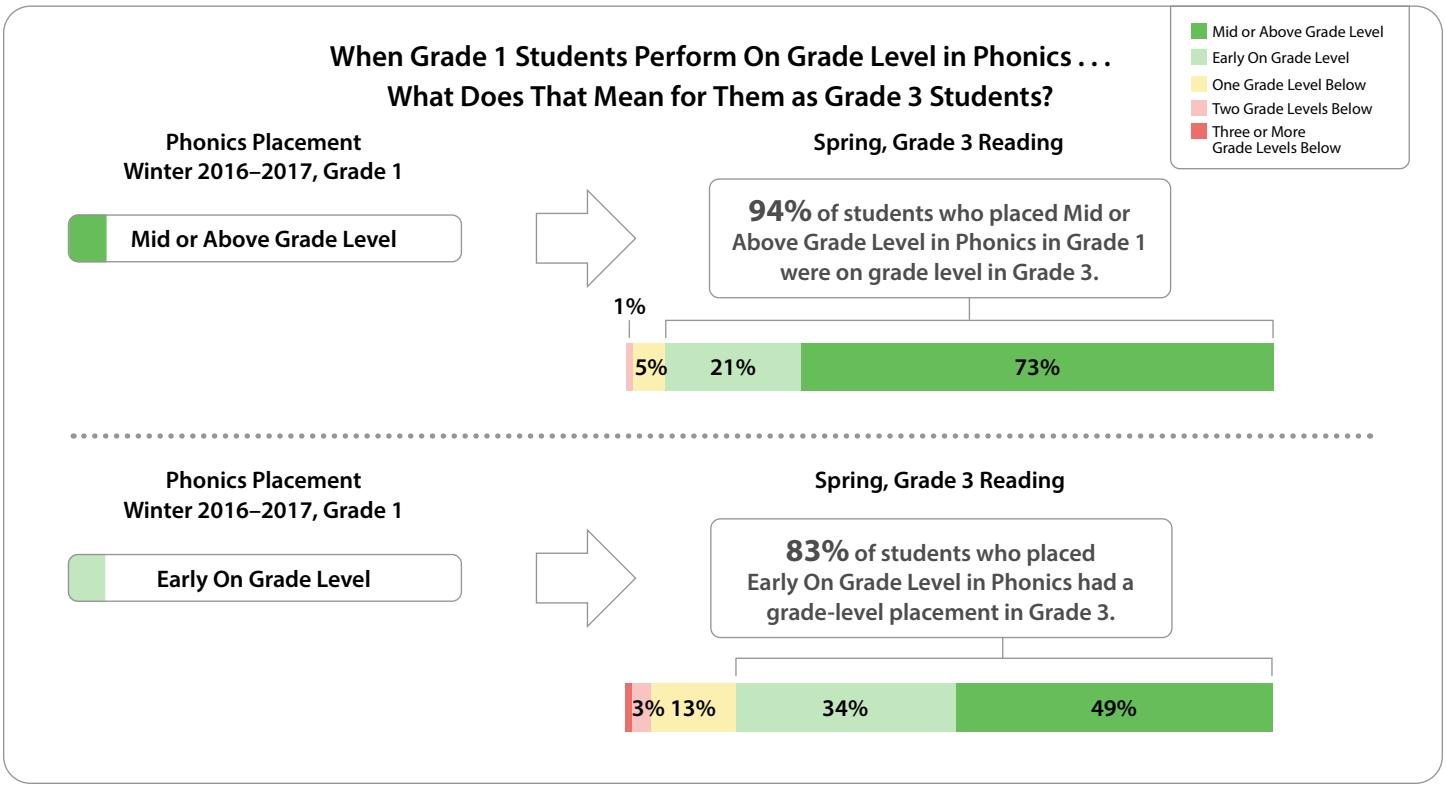
Foundational Skills Are Powerful

At Curriculum Associates, we regularly examine the reading achievement of more than 13 million students across the country who take the *i-Ready Diagnostic* in their classrooms. Recently, a study was undertaken to better understand the extent to which students' Reading domain placements in Grades K–2 predicted their Overall Reading scores two years later in Grades 2–4.

The domains included in this analysis are the six domains assessed by the *i-Ready Diagnostic* for Reading: Phonics, Phonological Awareness, High-Frequency Words, Vocabulary, Comprehension: Literature, and Comprehension: Informational Text. The Overall Reading score represents student performance across all domains a student takes, which may include foundational, vocabulary, and comprehension domains.

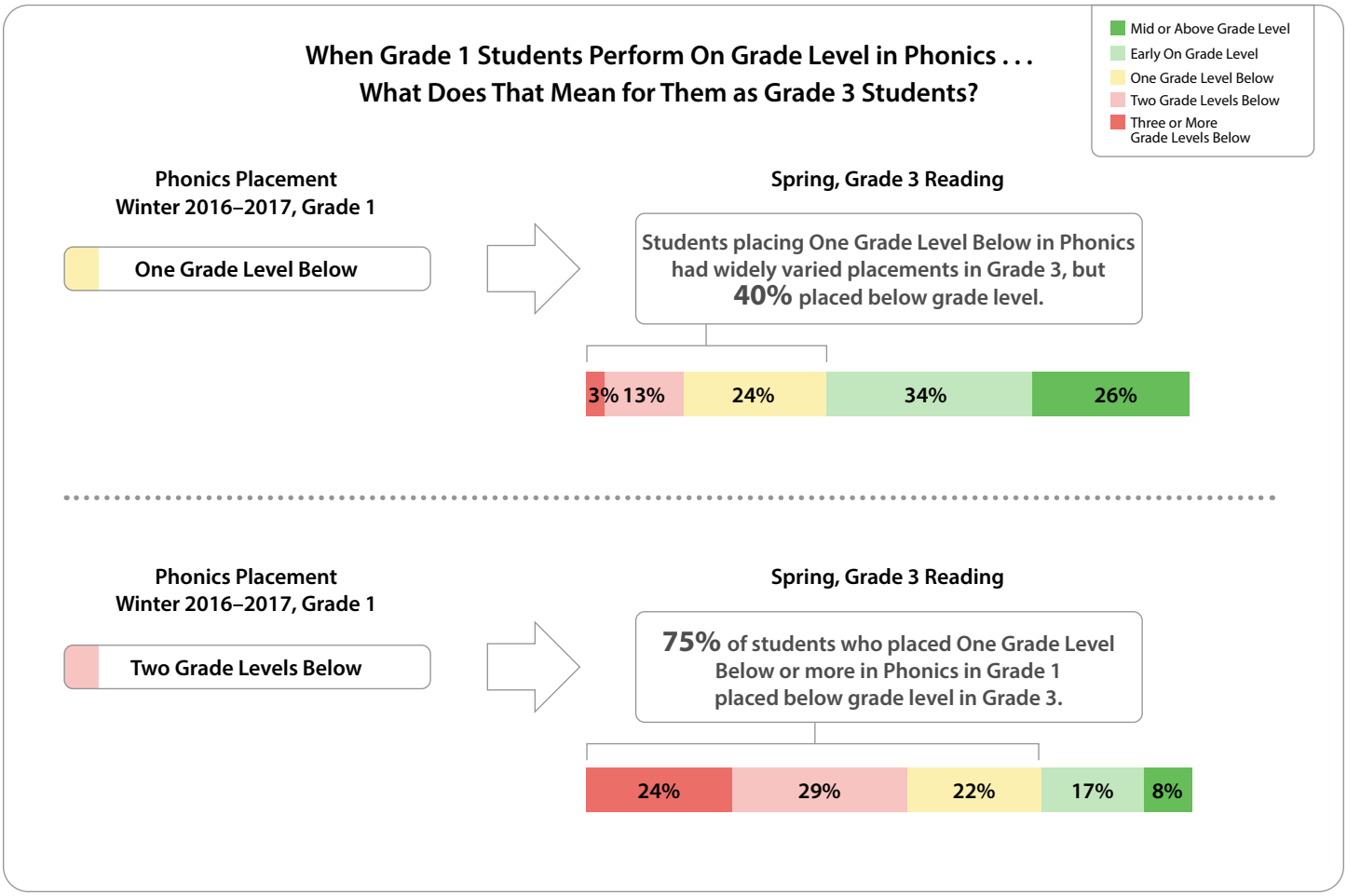


The study found that early foundational literacy skills were predictive of later overall reading success (Crone et al., 2023). In Grades K and 1, all Reading domains were predictive of later reading success, and foundational skills were the most powerful predictors. To further examine the close link between these skills, consider that nearly all (i.e., 94%) Grade 1 students who were Mid or Above Grade Level and 83% of Grade 1 students who were Early On Grade Level in the Phonics domain had an on-grade level Overall Reading placement in Grade 3.



What Happens When Students Need More Support with Phonics Skills?

Grade 1 students who were One Grade Level Below in Phonics had widely varied placements in Grade 3, but 40% placed below grade level. Three-quarters of students who placed two or more grade levels below in Phonics in Grade 1 ended up below grade level in Grade 3.



What about Phonological Awareness and High-Frequency Words?

All foundational reading skill domains showed similar relationships to Grade 3 success. For Phonological Awareness and High-Frequency Words, there was a similar—though somewhat less pronounced—pattern for students that followed what we saw in Phonics. See Table 1.

Domain	Domain Placement	Number of Students	Three+ Grade Levels Below	Two Grade Levels Below	One Grade Level Below	Early On Grade Level	Mid or Above Grade Level
Phonics	Two Grade Levels Below	4,490	24%	29%	22%	17%	8%
	One Grade Level Below	66,959	3%	13%	24%	34%	26%
	Early On Grade Level	21,383	0%	3%	13%	34%	49%
	Mid or Above Grade Level	59,786	0%	1%	5%	21%	73%
Phonological Awareness	Two Grade Levels Below	5,361	17%	28%	26%	20%	9%
	One Grade Level Below	59,694	4%	13%	24%	34%	26%
	Early On Grade Level	6,220	2%	9%	20%	37%	32%
	Mid or Above Grade Level	81,343	0%	2%	8%	25%	66%
High-Frequency Words	Two Grade Levels Below	5,894	20%	28%	22%	19%	10%
	One Grade Level Below	47,557	4%	16%	26%	33%	21%
	Early/Mid On Grade Level	12,740	1%	6%	19%	37%	37%
	Mid or Above Grade Level	86,427	0%	2%	8%	25%	65%

Early Identification and Instruction: A Strong Combination

Strengthening students' foundational reading skills in early elementary school can help reverse the trend toward lower reading proficiency rates on national assessments and prevent unintended but related consequences such as low grades, high absences, and behavioral issues that research shows are related to early literacy.

To support equitable student learning, educators should consider combining:

- Assessments to identify gaps in foundational reading skills
- High-quality instructional materials
- An evidence-based reading approach, such as the recommendation for daily, systematic phonics instruction as the National Reading Panel describes in *Teaching Children to Read* (NRP, 2000)

Pairing valid and reliable early identification with evidence-based instruction in phonics skills in the classroom allows teachers to teach to students' strengths and address any needs in a timely and meaningful way.

If we don't help teachers understand students' phonics skills and deficits, how can we expect them to teach children how to read? And if we don't teach children how to read, how can we expect them to succeed later? Using a reliable screener and progress monitoring tool alongside an evidence-based reading instruction program removes a lot of the guesswork on where to focus. Teachers can focus instead on delivering impactful instruction.

Read the complete research: The data referenced in this paper is based on a follow-up analysis leveraging the same underlying data as in the *Understanding the Relationship between Early Literacy Domains and Reading in Later Grades* research report. Read the full research study here.

To learn how *i-Ready Diagnostic* can help you identify students' early literacy skills, explore the benefits here.

Learn more about how *Magnetic Reading Foundations* provides explicit and systematic foundational literacy skills instruction through research-based routines, engaging texts, and timely assessment to support reading development here.

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