



Early Readers, Lasting Odds: 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency and High School Outcomes in Georgia

Policy, Research and Evaluation

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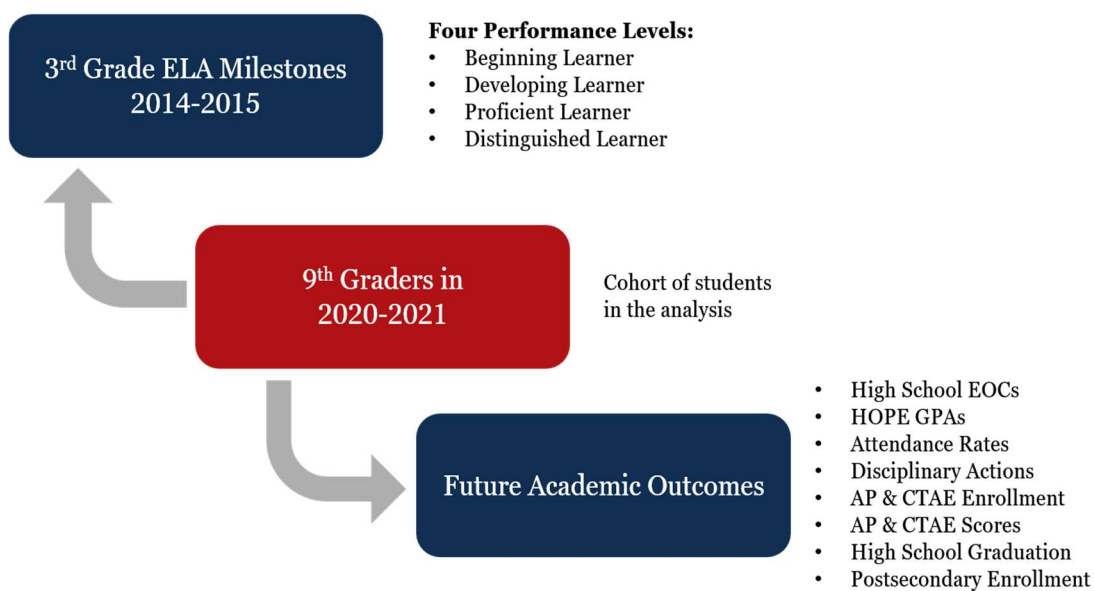
About This Report

This report analyzes longitudinal data linking 3rd grade English Language Arts (ELA) Georgia Milestones scores from the 2014-2015 school year to high school outcomes for the 9th grade cohort starting in the 2020-2021 school year. Utilizing data provided by GA•AWARDS, Georgia's longitudinal education data system, this study examines students End-of-Course (EOC) assessments, HOPE GPA eligibility, attendance, disciplinary records, course-taking pathways, and postsecondary enrollment. Note that these estimates are predictive rather than causal, illustrating long-term trajectories associated with early reading proficiency.

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Figure 1

Flowchart of Student-Level Longitudinal Data



Key Findings

- Students scoring below proficient on 3rd-grade reading struggle across high school indicators, tracking behind peers in GPA, assessment proficiency, attendance, and discipline.
- Fewer than 1-in-3 Beginning readers (31.2%) and less than half of Developing readers (49.9%) enroll in colleges or universities, compared to 67.5% or more of proficient peers.
- While high school CTAE enrollment remains high across reading levels (~83%-92%), Beginning readers experience a fraction of the AP course participation (14.8% vs. 83.6%) relative to Distinguished readers.



Literacy Policy in Georgia

Reading comprehension is a foundational skill for student's academic careers and life. Georgia's Literacy Plan, Vision 2030, defines their goals for every child as a reader:

Every child in Georgia is a confident, capable reader, supported by strong families, excellent educators, and unified community partnerships. From birth through high school, children develop foundational language skills, engage deeply in literacy and learning, and have access to advanced opportunities that prepare them for college, career, and citizenship.

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Empirical research shows that the Decoding Threshold, the point at which word reading becomes accurate and automatic, is a key predictor of student's reading comprehension. Below this threshold students struggle to make meaningful progress in reading comprehension regardless of their language skills (Wang et al., 2019). Beyond early elementary grades, texts become increasingly complex, requiring advanced multisyllabic decoding, subject-specific vocabulary, and complex syntactic processing. Studies show correlations between early literacy proficiency, increased high school graduation and decreased dropout rates (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010; Hernandez, 2011; Lesnick et al., 2010). Prior research by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA, now GOEWS) examined correlations between 3rd grade reading proficiency, high school graduation rates, and ACT/ SAT performance (2017).

Overview of Students Included in Analysis

This analysis includes 108,890 students from the 2020-2021 9th grade cohort who took the 3rd grade ELA Milestones assessment in 2014-2015, representing approximately 72% of the statewide cohort. Overall, 38% of students scored Proficient or Distinguished, 31% scored Developing, and 31% scored in the Beginning Learner level (Table 1)¹.

Table 1

Summary Statistics by Demographic Subgroup

Group	3 rd Grade Beginning		3 rd Grade Developing		3 rd Grade Proficient		3 rd Grade Distinguished		Total
	<i>Number</i>	<i>% of Total</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>% of Total</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>% of Total</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>% of Total</i>	<i>Number</i>
All Students	33,986	31%	33,499	31%	29,795	27%	11,610	11%	108,890

¹ Refer to Appendix A Table A1 for the full summary statistics table by student race, gender, students disability status (SWD), English Language Learners (ELL), and economic disadvantage (FRPL).

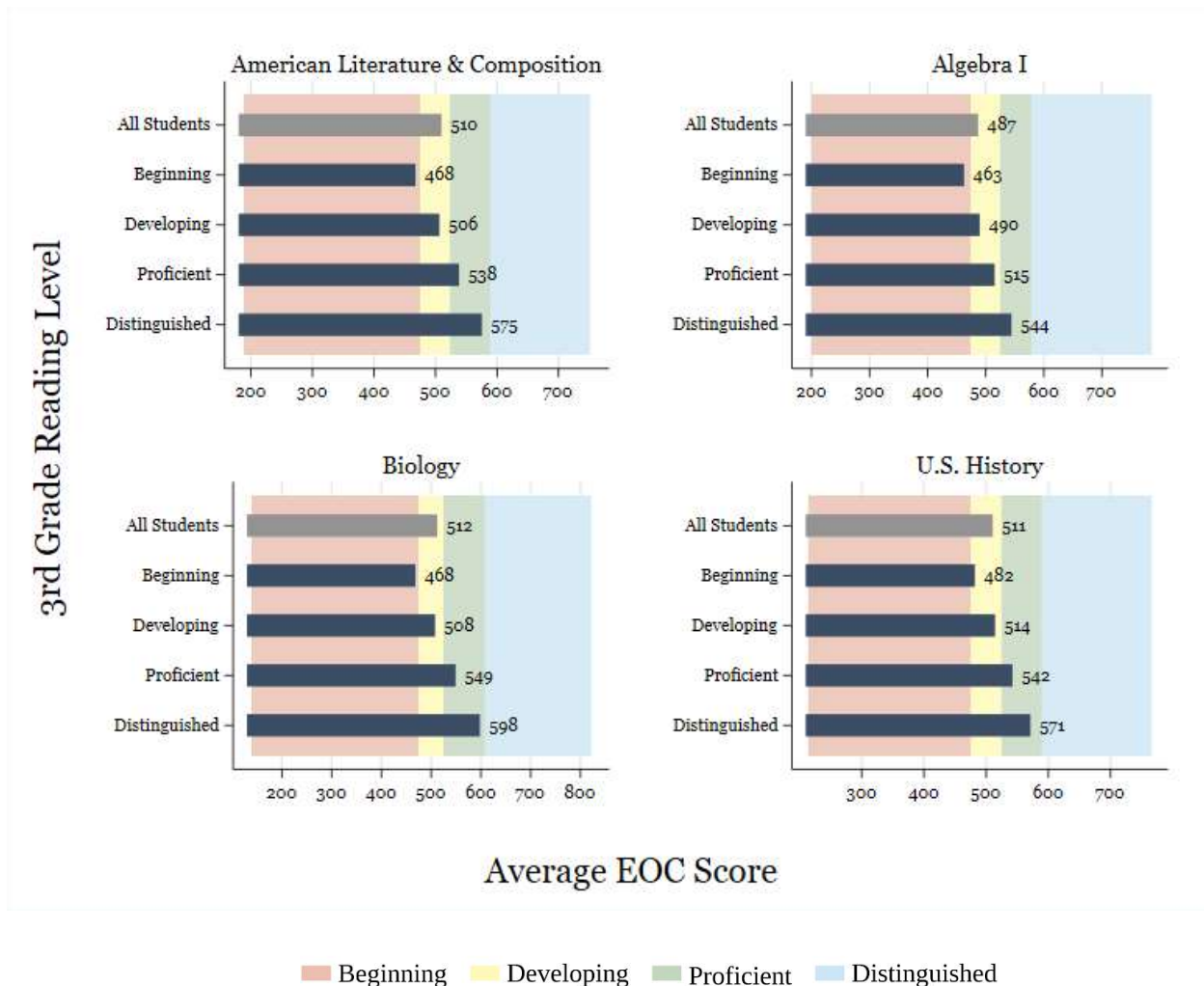


Early Reading Proficiency Persists Across High School Assessments & Course Grades

Figure 2

Average EOC scores for Algebra I, American Literature and Composition, Biology, and US History by 3rd grade ELA proficiency

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Note: This figure utilizes the highest score available for students on high school EOC assessments and 3rd grade ELA Milestones. Each panel reflects the score range specific to that assessment. Axes are not standardized across subjects.

On average, students who scored in the Beginning Learner category in 3rd grade remained in the Beginning Learner category on their high school American Literature (468), Algebra I (463), and Biology (468) EOC exams. Figure 2 illustrates the average End-of-Course (EOC) performance across key secondary subjects – American Literature & Composition, Algebra I, Biology, and U.S. History – broken out by 3rd grade reading levels. U.S. history was the exception, where Beginning 3rd grade readers averaged a score in the lower threshold of the Developing Learner category (482). Conversely, students who scored proficient or above in 3rd grade continued to

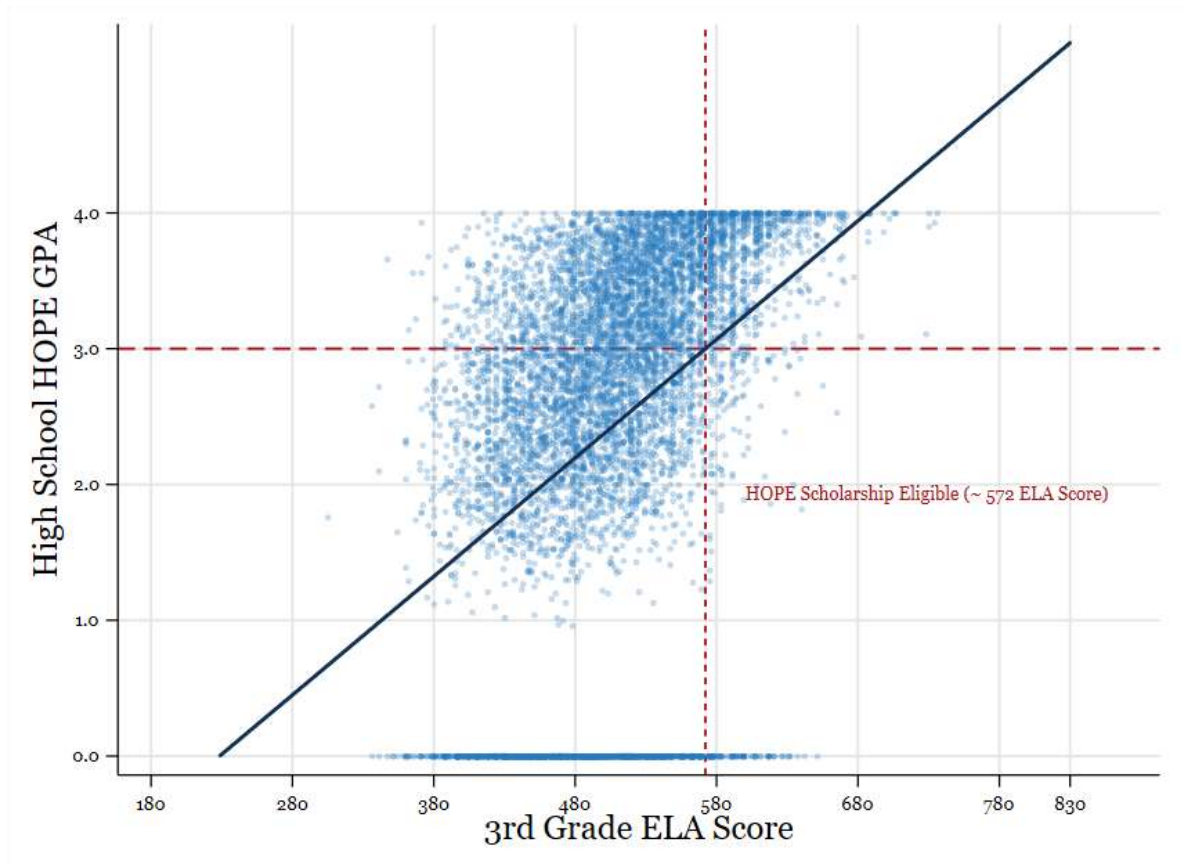


score proficient in their high school Milestones; Algebra I was the exception with proficient 3rd grade readers scoring at the upper threshold of the Developing Learner category (515).

Figure 3

Relationship Between 3rd Grade ELA Scores and High School HOPE GPA

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Beyond assessments, 3rd grade reading proficiency predicts higher HOPE GPAs and scholarship eligibility. Figure 3 demonstrates a continuous linear relationship between 3rd grade ELA scores and high school HOPE GPAs. This model predicts a 3rd-grade ELA score of approximately 572, which is within the Proficient Learner category, is the cutoff for a high school HOPE GPA of 3.0 or higher. To be eligible for Georgia's HOPE Scholarship a student must graduate with a minimum HOPE GPA of 3.0.

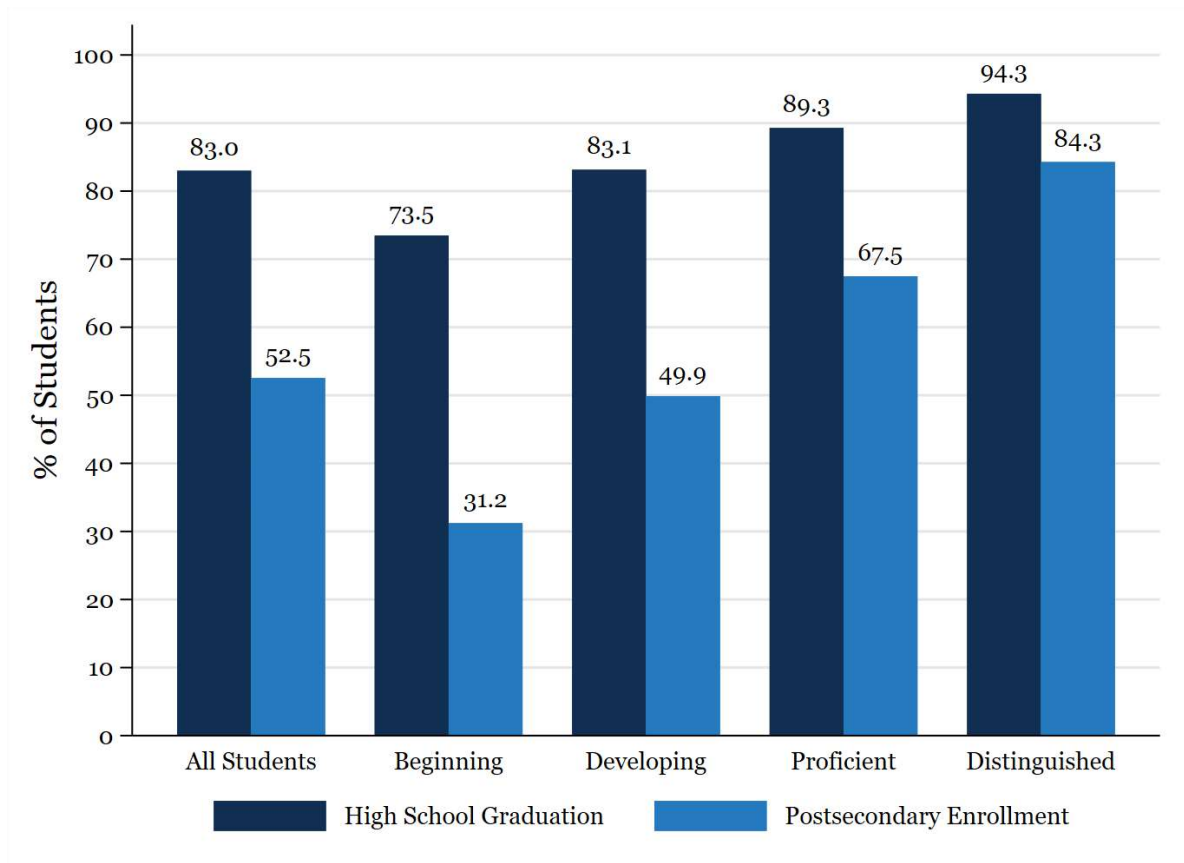


Below-Proficient 3rd-Grade Readers Face Lower College Matriculation Rates

Figure 4

High School Graduation and Postsecondary Enrollment Rate by 3rd grade ELA Proficiency

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Less than half of students who scored below proficient in 3rd grade ELA enrolled in postsecondary institutions. Figure 4 highlights a notable gap between high school completion and postsecondary transition: 73.5% of 3rd-grade Beginning Learners and 83.1% of Developing Learners successfully graduate high school, compared to 89.3% of Proficient and 94.3% of Distinguished learners. Only 31.2% of Beginning Learners and less than 50% of Developing Learners went on to enroll in a postsecondary institution. In contrast, 67.5% of Proficient and 84.3% of Distinguished readers transition to higher education.

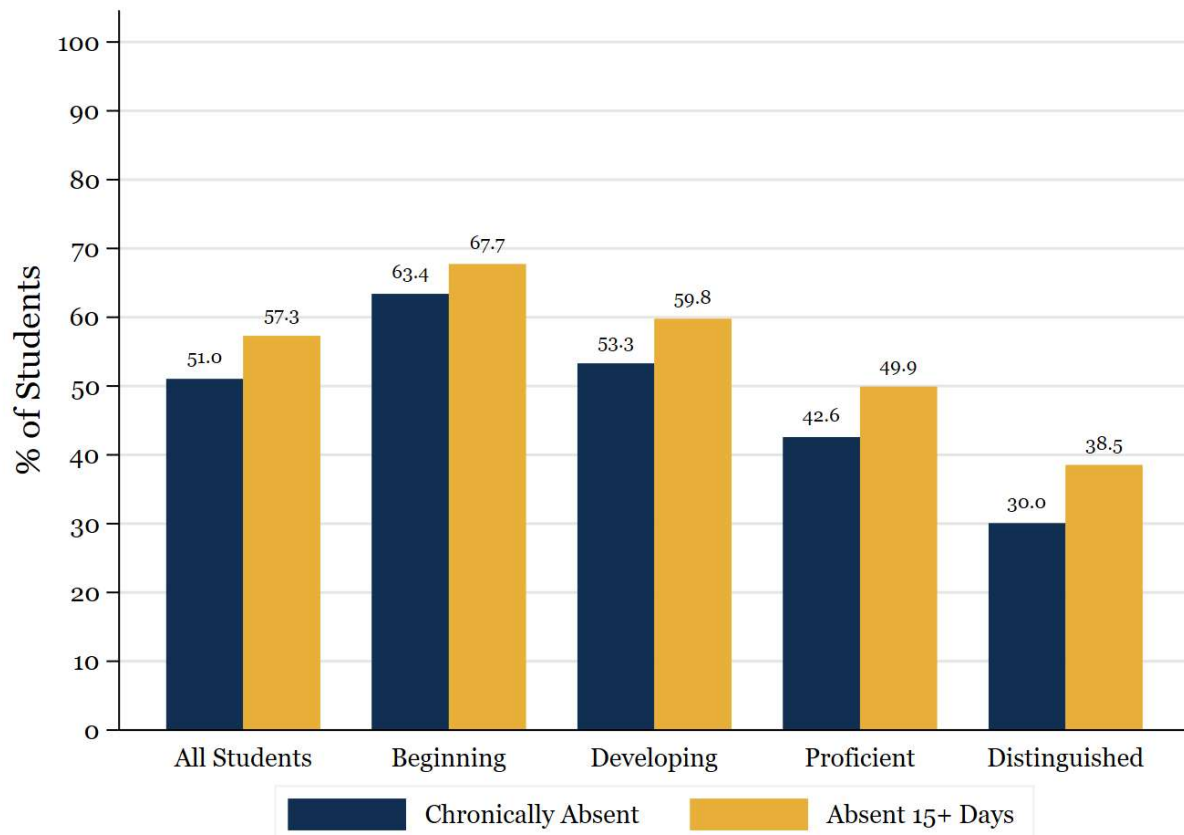


Early Reading Gaps Correlate with Increased Absenteeism & Discipline Infractions

Figure 5

Percentage Chronic Absenteeism and Days Absent by 3rd Grade ELA Proficiency

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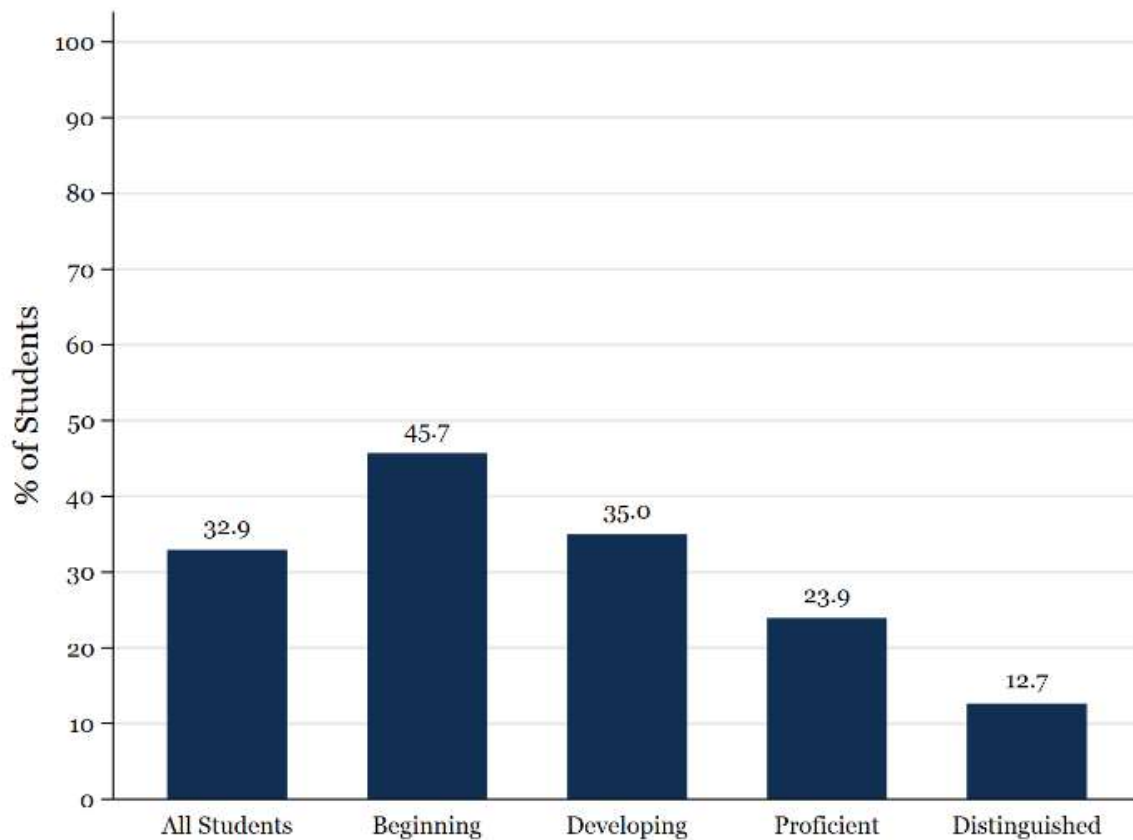


Using the definition of chronic absenteeism established by the Georgia Senate Study Committee on Chronic Absenteeism (2025), missing 10% or more of school days, as well as missing 15+ days, 3rd-grade reading proficiency predicts higher rates of secondary attendance. Figure 5 shows that approximately 63% of Beginning 3rd-grade readers were chronically absent in high school, and approximately 68% missed 15 or more days. These rates are higher than the state average, 51% and 57% for chronic absenteeism and 15+ days absent, respectively. In contrast, only 30% of Distinguished readers were chronically absent. Regression models show that even after controlling student demographic and special population factors (i.e. SWD, ELL, FRPL), there is still a statistically significant difference in chronic absenteeism relative to Beginning readers: Proficient readers were 17.3 percentage points less likely to be chronically absent and Distinguished readers were 26.1 percentage points ($p < 0.001$, Appendix Table A2).



Figure 6

Percentage of In-School and Out-of-School Suspension, Expulsion, and Disciplinary Action by 3rd Grade ELA Proficiency



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Beginning level readers were also substantially more likely to receive disciplinary infractions in high school. While approximately 46% of Beginning 3rd-grade readers received a disciplinary action (ISS, OSS, or Expulsion) in high school, less than 24% of Proficient readers and less than 13% of Distinguished readers received infractions (Figure 6). Adjusted models show compared to Beginning readers, Proficient and Distinguished readers were 16.0 and 23.1 percentage points less likely to receive a disciplinary action ($p < 0.001$, Appendix Table A3).

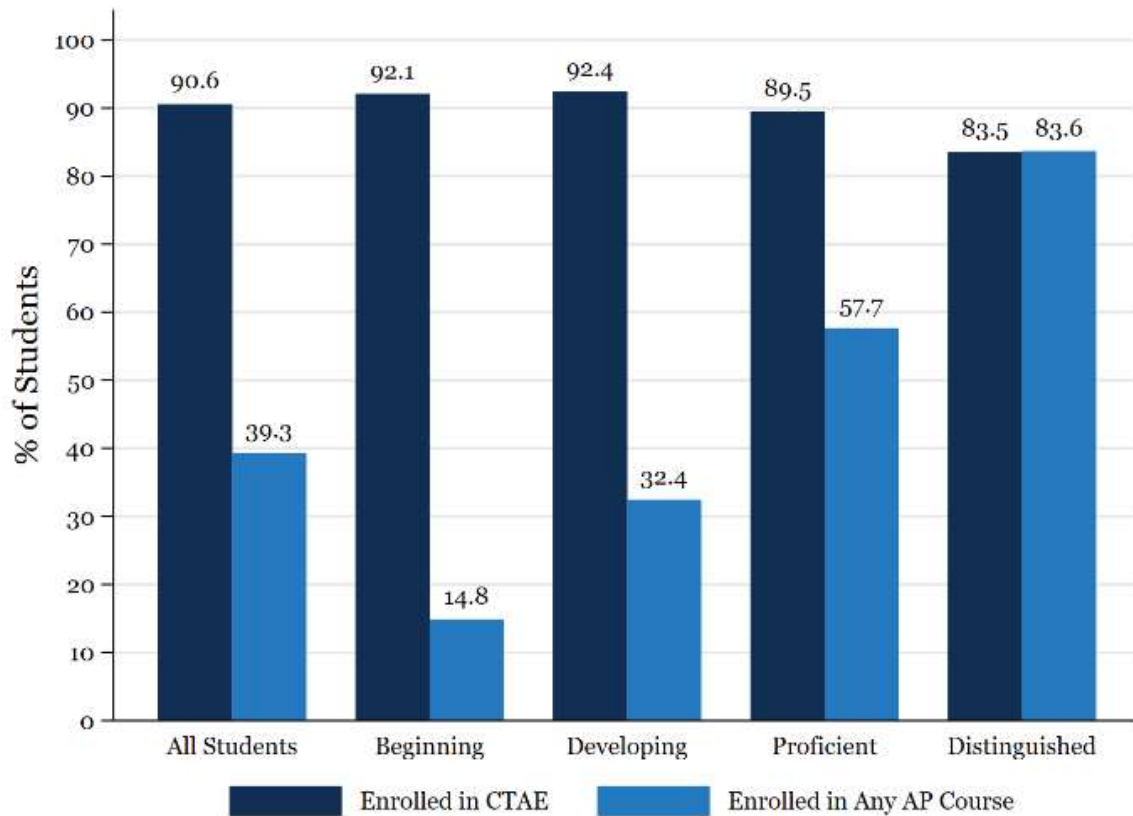


AP Course-Taking and Exam Passage Vary Sharply by Reading Level

Figure 7

Percent Enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) and Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) Courses by 3rd Grade ELA Proficiency

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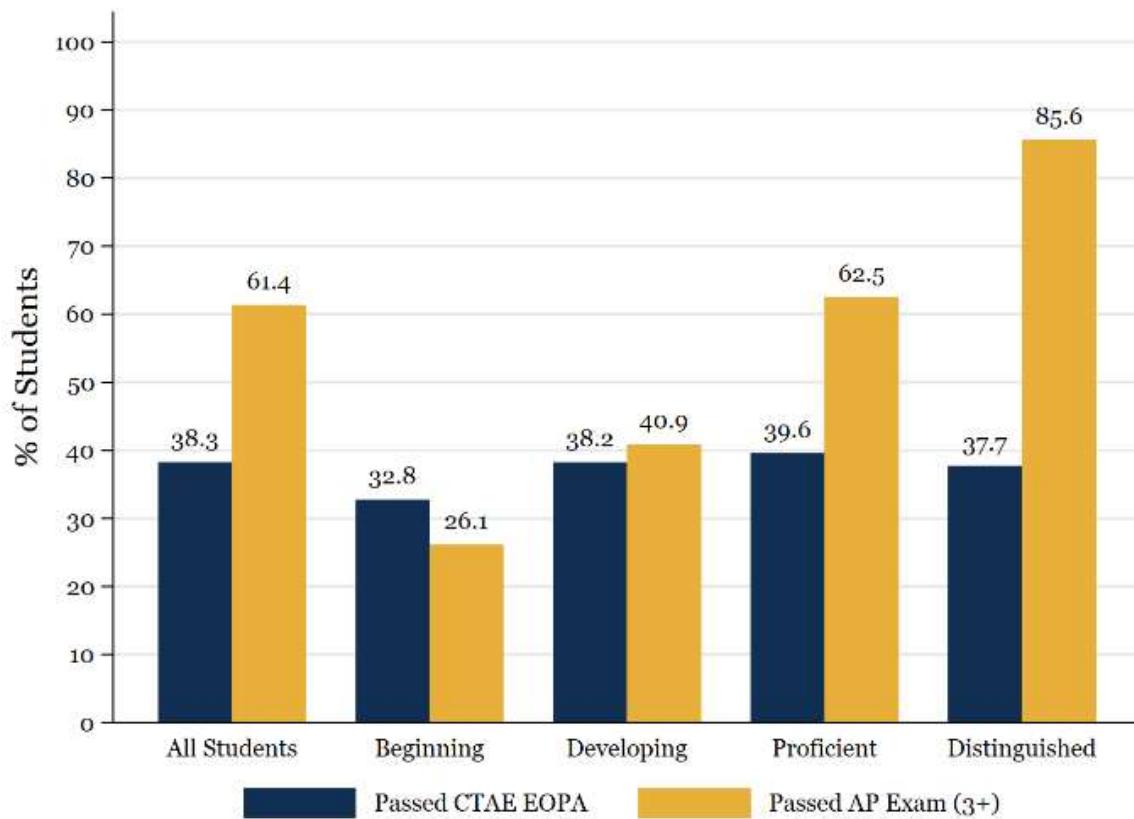


Only 14.8% of Beginning readers enrolled in an AP course compared to 83.6% of Distinguished readers, representing approximately 53,000 students. In contrast, nearly 48,000 students enrolled in at least one CTAE course and enrollment in CTAE pathways remains relatively equal across all 3rd-grade reading levels, ranging from 92.1% for Beginning readers to 83.5% for Distinguished readers (Figure 7).



Figure 8

Percent of Students Passing an Advanced Placement (AP) and Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) Courses by 3rd Grade ELA Proficiency



While CTAE enrollment is relatively consistent across proficiency levels, passing End-of-Pathway Assessments (EOPAs) hovers around 33% to 39% across all student tiers, 32.8% for Beginning vs. 37.7% for Distinguished (Figure 8). However, AP exam performance (scoring 3+) is highly divergent: 85.6 of Distinguished readers passed their AP exams compared to only 26.1% of Beginning readers.



Limitations & Future Research

The analyses presented are a part of a requested [update to GOSA's 2017 study](#) on behalf of Get Georgia Reading that includes additional research questions on attendance, HOPE eligibility, and post-secondary enrollment. 3rd grade reading proficiency scores are associated with high school assessment performance.² However, more research is needed to understand the causal mechanisms that underscore these relationships. Future analyses may add to these findings by examining how and to what degree early literacy interventions create and sustain reading comprehension progress for students; how literacy expectations change as students' progress into middle and high grades.

² The full slate of initial exploratory analyses on how 3rd reading proficiency relates to high school outcomes are addressed in Appendix Table A4.



References

- Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2010). *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation. [ED509795.pdf](#)
- Georgia Senate Study Committee on Chronic Absenteeism. (2025). Final Report. Georgia General Assembly. <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/document/docs/default-source/senate-study-committees-document-library/2025-sr-217-absenteeism-final-report.pdf>
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- Lesnick, J., Goerge, R., Smithgall, C., & Gwynne J. (2010). Reading on Grade Level in Third Grade: How Is It Related to High School Performance and College Enrollment? Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. [Reading on Grade Level 111710.pdf](#)
- Wang, Z., Sabatini, J., O'reilly, T., & Weeks, J. (2019). Decoding and reading comprehension: A test of the decoding threshold hypothesis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 111(3), 387.



Appendix A

Table A. 1:
Summary Statistics by Demographic Subgroup

Group	3 rd Grade Beginning		3 rd Grade Developing		3 rd Grade Proficient		3 rd Grade Distinguished		Total
	<i>Number</i>	<i>% of Total</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>% of Total</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>% of Total</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>% of Total</i>	<i>Number</i>
All Students	33,986	31%	33,499	31%	29,795	27%	11,610	11%	108,890
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1,780	44%	1,354	33%	764	19%	150	4%	4,048
Asian	676	13%	1,049	20%	1,810	35%	1,629	32%	5,164
Black	17,583	43%	13,029	32%	8,517	21%	2,142	5%	41,271
Hispanic	6,587	37%	6,028	34%	4,020	23%	1,047	6%	17,682
Pacific Islander	234	37%	225	36%	136	22%	36	6%	631
Two or More Races	1,315	27%	1,459	30%	1,431	30%	580	12%	4,785
White	13,149	24%	16,594	31%	17,247	32%	7,302	13%	54,292
Female	14,036	26%	16,324	30%	16,263	30%	7,199	13%	53,822
Male	19,918	36%	17,101	31%	13,387	24%	4,324	8%	54,730
Economically Disadvantaged (FRPL)	32,076	36%	28,704	32%	21,580	24%	6,185	7%	88,545
English Language Learners (ELL)	1,891	34%	1,946	35%	1,352	24%	393	7%	5,582
Students with Disabilities (SWD)	12,371	63%	4,327	22%	2,318	12%	625	3%	19,641



Table A. 2:

Association Between 3rd Grade Reading Level and High School Chronic Absenteeism

Variables	(1) Unadjusted Logit	(2) Adjusted Logit (Odds Ratios)	(3) Adjusted Linear Probability Model
Beginning Learner	0.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Developing Learner	-0.417*** (0.035)	0.685*** (0.023)	-0.090*** (0.008)
Proficient Learner	-0.848*** (0.052)	0.486*** (0.026)	-0.173*** (0.013)
Distinguished Learner	-1.394*** (0.058)	0.322*** (0.029)	-0.261*** (0.021)
Female		1.162*** (0.021)	0.035*** (0.004)
Free or Reduced Price Lunch		2.270*** (0.233)	0.188*** (0.024)
Students with Disability		0.889*** (0.023)	-0.027*** (0.006)
Limited English Proficiency		0.802*** (0.034)	-0.052*** (0.010)
Black or African American		1.007 (0.085)	0.003 (0.020)
Hispanic		1.053 (0.067)	0.013 (0.015)
Asian		0.503*** (0.026)	-0.143*** (0.011)
American Indian or Alaska Native		1.240** (0.090)	0.051** (0.016)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander		1.035 (0.107)	0.008 (0.024)
Two or More Races		1.222** (0.078)	0.043** (0.015)
_cons	0.549*** (0.075)	0.814* (0.073)	0.458*** (0.020)
N	108890	101036	101036
R ²			0.077

Standard errors in parentheses

Note. Standard errors clustered at the school district level are in parentheses. Reference group for race is White; reference category for 3rd Grade Reading is Beginning Learner.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$



Table A. 3:
Association Between 3rd Grade Reading Level and High School Discipline

Variables	(1) Unadjusted Logit	(2) Adjusted Logit (Odds Ratios)	(3) Adjusted Linear Probability Model
Beginning Learner	0.000 (.)	1.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Developing Learner	-0.448*** (0.023)	0.727*** (0.018)	-0.079*** (0.006)
Proficient Learner	-0.985*** (0.032)	0.487*** (0.018)	-0.160*** (0.008)
Distinguished Learner	-1.760*** (0.042)	0.274*** (0.018)	-0.231*** (0.013)
Female		0.636*** (0.015)	-0.093*** (0.005)
Free or Reduced Price Lunch		2.101*** (0.124)	0.123*** (0.011)
Students with Disability		0.989 (0.029)	-0.002 (0.007)
Limited English Proficiency		0.898* (0.038)	-0.023** (0.008)
Black or African American		1.436*** (0.081)	0.083*** (0.012)
Hispanic		0.819** (0.062)	-0.041** (0.015)
Asian		0.547*** (0.061)	-0.085*** (0.019)
American Indian or Alaska Native		1.059 (0.073)	0.012 (0.015)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander		0.957 (0.093)	-0.011 (0.020)
Two or More Races		1.093 (0.062)	0.013 (0.012)
_cons	-0.172*** (0.046)	0.444*** (0.024)	0.352*** (0.010)
N	108890	101036	101036
R ²			0.087

Standard errors in parentheses

Note. Standard errors clustered at the school district level are in parentheses. Reference group for race is White; reference category for 3rd Grade Reading ALD is Beginning (Level 1).

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$



Table A. 4:
Association Between 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency and Student Outcomes

Outcome Variable	3rd Grade Proficient	Standard Errors	N
High School Graduation	0.096***	(0.005)	101,036
High School Dropout	-0.063***	(0.005)	101,036
GPA 3.0+	0.275***	(0.010)	101,036
Postsecondary Enrollment	0.237***	(0.012)	101,036
HOPE Scholarship Eligible	0.286***	(0.010)	101,036
EOC Math Proficient	0.261***	(0.011)	50,612
EOC Literature Proficient	0.449***	(0.008)	87,200
GAA Participation	-0.002***	(0.000)	101,036
Multiple Core Courses	-0.123***	(0.009)	101,036
Credit Recovery	-0.050***	(0.007)	100,470
AP/IB Course Taking	0.000	(0.000)	40,070
Dual Enrollment	0.139***	(0.015)	101,036
CTAE Enrollment	-0.031***	(0.006)	101,036
Passed CTAE EOPA	0.093***	(0.009)	101,036
Chronic Absenteeism	-0.142***	(0.012)	101,036
Absent <= 5 Days	0.096***	(0.011)	101,036
Absent 6-15 Days	0.023***	(0.006)	101,036
Absent > 15 Days	-0.131***	(0.011)	101,036
In-School Suspension (ISS)	-0.099***	(0.008)	101,036
Out-of-School Suspension (OSS)	-0.089***	(0.005)	101,036
Expulsion	-0.002**	(0.001)	101,036

Note. Linear Probability Models (LPM) controlling for race, gender, FRL, SWD, and ELL status.
Standard errors clustered at the school district level.

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

