



State of Literacy in Georgia

Overview

This memo presents a snapshot of literacy data to track Georgia's progress toward stronger student reading outcomes. Drawing on statewide and national assessment results, it examines historical trends, performance across student subgroups, and how Georgia compares to other states.

Key Takeaways

Four findings run through the report:

1. **The floor keeps moving down.** The 2024-25 proficiency rate of 35.1% is the lowest in seven years, and the drop from 2023-24 is larger than the immediate post-COVID decline.
2. **This is not just a 3rd grade problem.** Below-proficient performance follows students across every grade from 3rd through 8th.
3. **The statewide average hides the real crisis.** Proficiency rates range from 14% to 62% depending on student subgroup. English learners, economically disadvantaged students, and Black and Hispanic students all fall well below the statewide average.
4. **Georgia is not an outlier.** Every southeastern state falls near the bottom of the national distribution. The region as a whole has come to accept a level of literacy performance that should not be considered a baseline.

Georgia's literacy proficiency is low, and the students furthest behind are the ones who can least afford it. The statewide 3rd grade rate of 35.1% masks a nearly 50-point spread across subgroups, from 14% for English learners to 62% for Asian students. Every state in the southeastern region is underperforming nationally, and the states that appear to outpace Georgia either benefit from structural advantages or have a decade head start on literacy reform.

About the Assessments

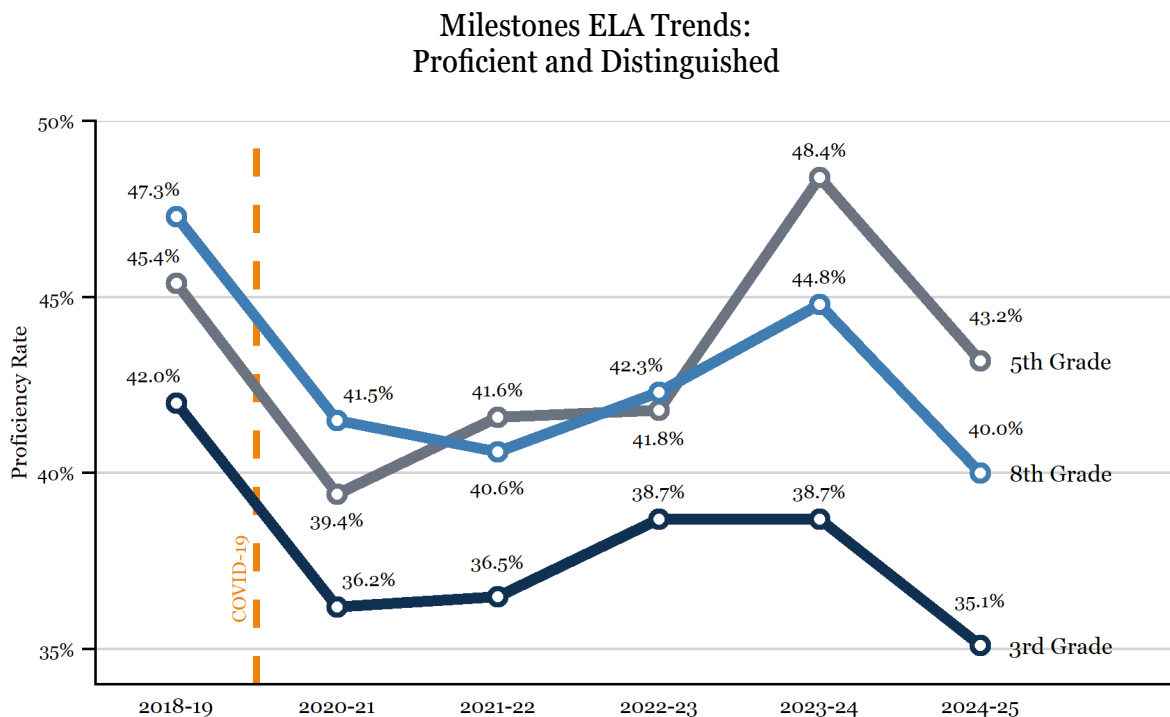
Georgia Milestones is administered annually to students in grades 3-8. ELA scores fall into four performance levels: Beginning, Developing, Proficient, and Distinguished Learners. Students who score above 525 are considered proficient.

National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) is a federally administered reading assessment given every two years to a representative sample of 4th, 8th, and 12th grade students nationwide.

Finding 1. The floor keeps moving down

Georgia's 3rd grade ELA proficiency rate has not been strong. Even before the pandemic, only 42% of 3rd graders were reading proficiently, meaning the majority were already behind. After proficiency dropped to 36.2% in 2020-21 due to COVID, a partial recovery followed, reaching 38.7% by 2023-24. Then in 2024-25, scores fell again to 35.1%, the lowest point in seven years, surpassing even the pandemic low. What was once a weak foundation now looks like an unreachable ceiling.

The 2024-25 decline is steeper than the COVID drop itself: 3.6 percentage points in a single year, compared to the 5.8-point decline that unfolded over two pandemic years. The factors driving it warrant further investigation.



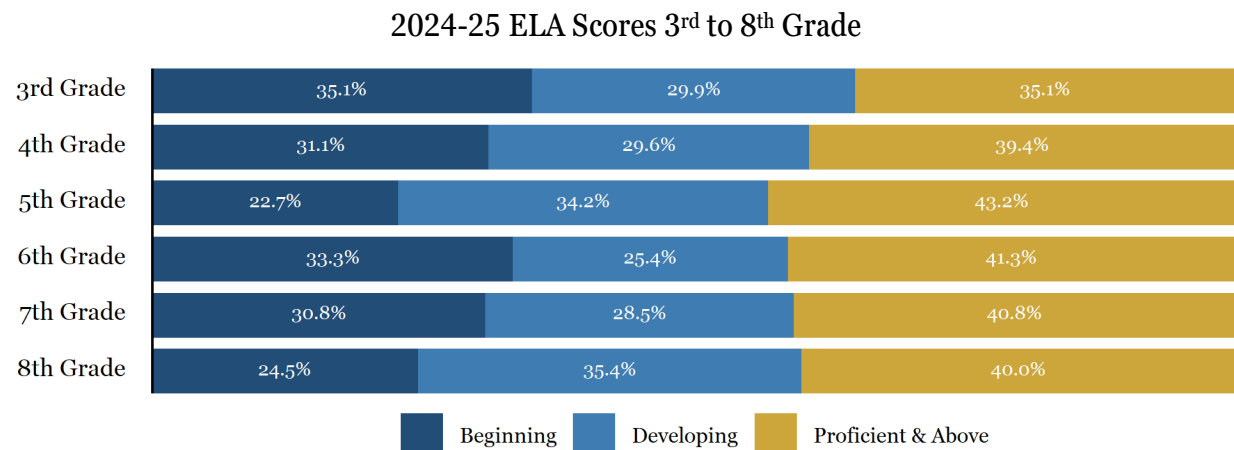
Source: Georgia Milestones End-of-Grade Assessments 2018-2025. GA-AWARDS

Note: Treat data points for 2020-21 and 2021-22 as directional only to reflect the well-documented testing disruptions and reporting inconsistencies during pandemic years.

This pattern holds across grade levels. Both 5th and 8th grade scores, which had approached or exceeded pre-COVID levels by 2023-24, fell by more than 4 percentage points in 2024-25, returning to near pandemic-era lows. The 2024-25 decline marks a system-wide setback, not an isolated one.

Finding 2. The problem follows students across every grade

In 2024-25, 3rd through 8th grades had a majority of students reading proficiently. In every grade, more than half of students scored at the Beginning or Developing level.



Source: Georgia Milestones End-of-Grade Assessment 2025. GA-AWARDS

Fifth grade has the lowest Beginning rate and the highest Proficient and Above rate of any grade. But the transition into 6th grade tells a different story. The Beginning rate jumps 10.6 percentage points from 5th to 6th grade, the steepest single-grade shift in the data. That spike likely reflects some combination of the academic demands of middle school, the social challenges of the transition, and gaps in how students are supported at that inflection point, but this data alone cannot pinpoint the cause.

Through 6th, 7th, and 8th grade, the picture is mixed. Students at the very bottom do make progress in the middle grades as the Beginning Learner rate drops 8.8 percentage points and students move into the Developing category. But that movement stops short of the threshold that matters. The share of students reaching Proficient and Above stays essentially flat across all three middle grades, hovering near 40%. Students are climbing off the floor but not reaching the bar for proficiency.

This is a distinct problem from simply having too many students at the bottom. It points to a gap in support for the students who are closest to proficiency, the ones who, with more targeted help, might get there.

Finding 3. The statewide average masks a 50-point range

The statewide proficiency rate of 35.1% is a poor guide because it averages over groups with vastly different outcomes. Proficiency rates range from 14% to 62%, a spread wide enough that the average has little meaning for the average student’s experience.

Economic Status

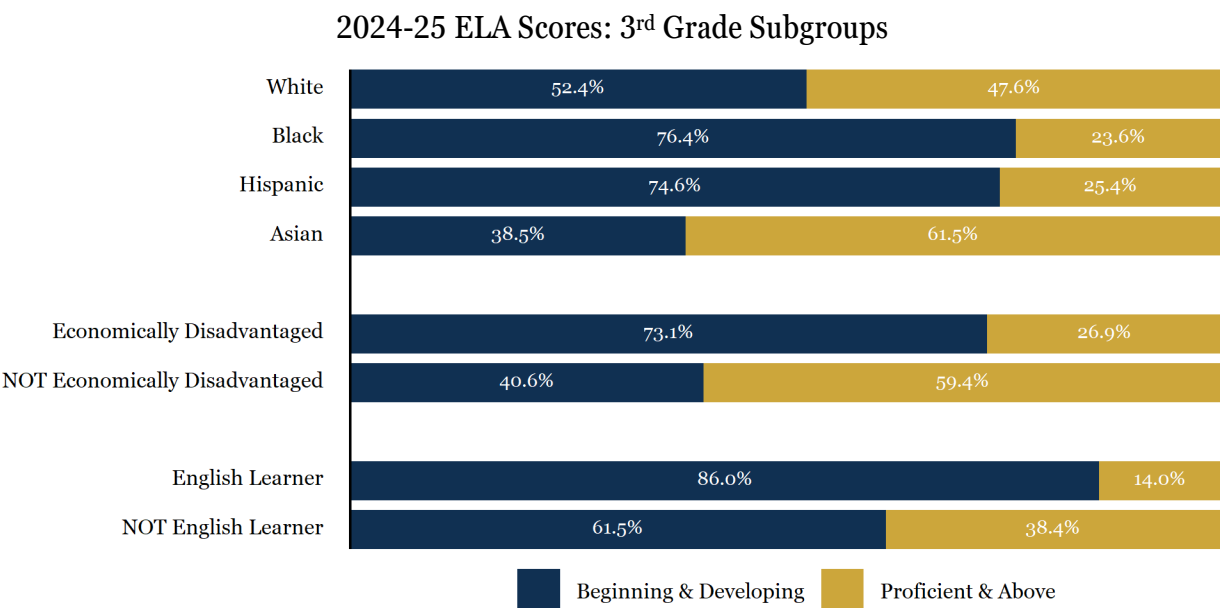
Based on the data, literacy outcomes are most strongly associated with economic hardship. Only 26.9% of economically disadvantaged 3rd graders read proficiently, compared to 59.3% of their peers who are not, a 32-percentage-point gap. Put differently, an economically disadvantaged student is less than half as likely to be reading proficiently as a peer who is not.

English Learners

English learners have the lowest proficiency rate of any subgroup: 14%, or roughly 1 in 7 students read proficiently. Proficiency rates for their non-EL peers are 24 percentage points higher, at 38.4%. Importantly, students whose primary language is English perform only slightly better than the statewide average. These students are still failing to reach proficiency at high rates, indicating that multilingualism and language acquisition alone do not explain Georgia's literacy problems.

Race and Ethnicity

Asian students are the only racial or ethnic group where a majority are proficient readers at 61.5%. White students are next at 47.6% which still means more than half of White 3rd graders are not reading proficiently. Black students (23.6%) and Hispanic students (25.4%) are each roughly 24 points below their White peers and nearly 40 points below Asian students. The gap at the top and the gap at the bottom are both striking.



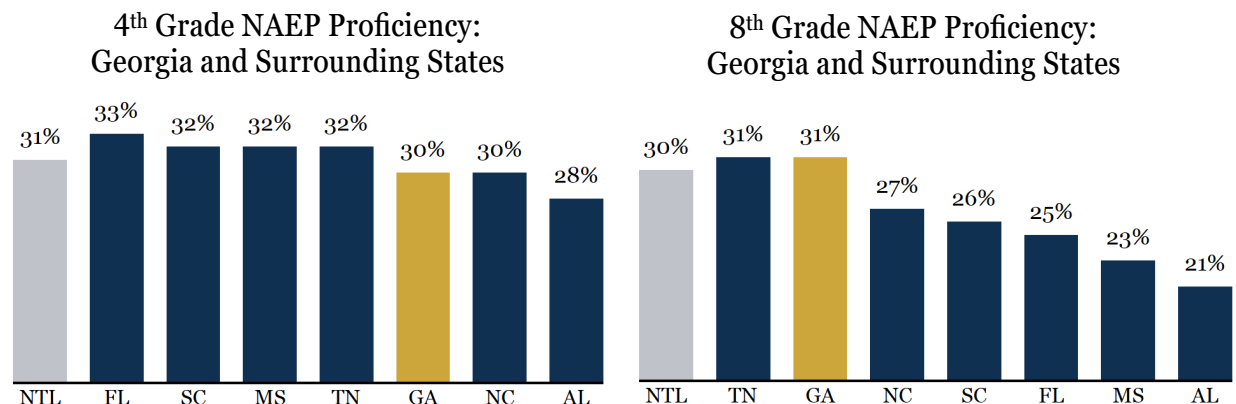
Source: Georgia Milestones End-of-Course Assessments 2025. GA-AWARDS

Finding 4. Georgia is not an outlier

Every southeastern state in the NAEP comparison sits within a narrow band around 30% proficiency at 4th grade. Florida leads at 33% and Alabama trails at 28%, a 5-point spread across seven states and the national average. Nobody is breaking away from the pack. This is a regional trend, not a Georgia-specific one, but that framing offers limited comfort.

Understanding the 4th grade comparison

Georgia's 4th grade NAEP proficiency rate was 30% in 2024, one point below the national average and behind Florida (33%), South Carolina (32%), Mississippi (32%), and Tennessee (32%). Two factors explain much of that gap. First, several peer states including Florida, and Mississippi require students to demonstrate reading proficiency before advancing to 4th grade. Because NAEP tests students enrolled in 4th grade, those states are effectively testing a stronger pool. Second, Georgia's peer states have longer reform histories. Mississippi's proficiency rose from 21% to 32% in the decade after its 2013 [Literacy-Based Promotion Act](#). Florida's reforms date to 2002. Georgia launched [comparable reforms in 2023](#) and [expanded them in 2026](#).



Source: U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2024 Reading Assessment.

Understanding the 8th grade comparison

By 8th grade, Georgia's rate climbs to 31%, above the national average of 29% and tied with Tennessee for the highest among neighboring states. Most peer states fall sharply: Florida drops to 26%, South Carolina to 26%, Mississippi to 23%. Georgia improves. This is less a sign of middle school strength than a reflection of the retention story running in reverse as states that tested a stronger 4th grade pool are now testing a broader 8th grade one, and their rates fall accordingly.



Closing

Georgia's literacy challenge is real, persistent, and unevenly distributed. In fact, the 2024-25 decline is a warning sign that warrants urgent attention. However, the path forward is visible. The 2023 reforms follow a playbook that has worked elsewhere, and Mississippi's experience shows that a decade of sustained investment can move the needle significantly.

Page | 6

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