

Ohio's Early Literacy Landscape

A Five-Year, District-Level Look at the Early Literacy Report Card Component, SY2021-22 through SY2025-26

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Introduction

Early reading has been a statewide priority in Ohio for several years. In 2023, Governor DeWine launched the ReadOhio initiative, a statewide effort to raise literacy achievement; its coaching network now includes 140 coaches serving more than 200 schools (Ohio Department of Education and Workforce [ODEW], 2026c, 2026d). The same year, House Bill 33 required every district to use only core curricula and instructional materials from the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce's (ODEW's) list of science-of-reading-aligned materials no later than SY2024-25, and generally barred the three-cueing approach to teaching reading (Ohio Legislative Service Commission [LSC], 2023).

On September 15, 2026, Governor DeWine, Lt. Governor Jim Tressel, and ODEW Director Stephen D. Dackin announced the 2026 report cards. Statewide English language arts proficiency across all tested grades reached a five-year high of 62.2% in SY2025-26, the first full year of instruction grounded in the science of reading, and the number of children demonstrating literacy readiness for kindergarten rose by 16,900 from the prior year (ODEW, 2026d). Those figures describe all tested grades and kindergarten readiness. The Early Literacy report card component, which focuses on third-grade reading and K-3 progress, looks different on the surface: its statewide weighted score fell in SY2025-26, largely because of a change in how the promotion measure is counted.

This brief has three purposes: to explain how the Early Literacy component is calculated and how its rules changed between SY2019-20 and SY2025-26; to separate changes in the rules from changes in students' reading in the five-year statewide trend; and to identify districts with consistently high or low results, and districts with sustained gains in third-grade reading proficiency, as a starting point for closer study. It is written for district and educational service center leaders, policymakers, and others who use Early Literacy results.

How the Early Literacy Component Is Calculated

ODEW's Early Literacy component combines three measures (ODEW, 2026a):

Proficiency in Third Grade Reading (40%) — the percentage of third graders who scored proficient on the reading portion of the state English language arts (ELA) test, meaning a reading subscore of 50 or higher (ODEW, 2026a). Because this is a reading measure, this brief calls it “reading proficiency” throughout; it is not the overall ELA proficiency rate.

Promotion to Fourth Grade (35%) — for SY2025-26, the percentage of third graders who met a test-score requirement for promotion: a score of 700 or higher on the ELA test, a reading subscore of 50 or higher, or the required score on an approved alternative reading assessment (ODEW, 2026a, 2026c).

Improving K-3 Literacy (25%) — the percentage of K-3 students identified as not on track on a reading diagnostic in one year who are on track the next year (for third graders, on track means proficient on that year's ELA test) (ODEW, 2026a). No Improving K-3

Literacy measure is calculated for a district with fewer than 10 off-track K-3 students, or with fewer than 10% of its kindergartners off track on the most recent fall diagnostic (ODEW, 2026a). Districts without the measure are rated on reading proficiency (60%) and promotion (40%) alone (ODEW, 2026a). That applied to 11–14% of rated districts in each of the five years, from 67 to 83 districts a year (ODEW, n.d.-b); statewide averages of Improving K-3 Literacy in this brief cover only districts that received the measure.

The weighted percentage converts to a 1-5 star rating. ODEW revised the thresholds effective August 31, 2026 (ODEW, 2026a). ODEW's published ratings reproduce exactly from each district's weighted percentage using the prior thresholds for SY2021-22 through SY2024-25 and the revised thresholds for SY2025-26, for all 605 or 606 rated districts in every year (Table 1; ODEW, n.d.-b, 2026a).

Table 1

Early Literacy Star-Rating Thresholds, SY2021-22 to SY2024-25 and SY2025-26

Rating	SY2021-22 to SY2024-25	SY2025-26
5 stars	88% or higher	89% or higher
4 stars	78% to under 88%	75% to under 89%
3 stars	68% to under 78%	61% to under 75%
2 stars	58% to under 68%	47% to under 61%
1 star	Under 58%	Under 47%

Note. Sources: ODEW Early Literacy Component Technical Documentation (ODEW, 2026a); verified against ODEW district data files (ODEW, n.d.-b).

Because the 2-, 3-, and 4-star thresholds were lowered, SY2025-26 star ratings are not directly comparable with earlier years. ODEW's data also report the share of kindergartners not on track on the fall reading diagnostic. This brief does not analyze that rate: districts could use either the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment's language and literacy section or a diagnostic from ODEW's approved list (ODEW, n.d.-d, 2026c), so the instrument behind the rate can differ across districts and years, and in SY2021-22, 24 districts reported 100% of kindergartners not on track, a figure no district reported by SY2024-25 (ODEW, n.d.-b). Five-year changes in that rate are therefore not comparable.

Changes Affecting Year-to-Year Comparisons

Ohio's Third Grade Reading Guarantee (Ohio Revised Code 3313.608) requires districts to assess K-3 students' reading, provide intervention to students reading below grade level, and retain a third grader who does not meet the promotion requirement unless an exemption applies (ODEW, 2026c; Ohio Rev. Code § 3313.608, 2025). Between SY2019-20 and SY2025-26, the rules behind the guarantee, the report card, and the underlying measures changed repeatedly. Table 2 lists the changes that bear on the data in this brief.

Table 2

Changes Affecting Year-to-Year Comparisons of Early Literacy Results

School year	Change	What it affects	Source
SY2019-20	House Bill 197: schools exempted from retaining a student based solely on reading performance, unless the principal and reading teacher determine the student is not ready for fourth grade	Promotion and retention	(LSC, 2020)

School year	Change	What it affects	Source
SY2020-21	House Bill 409: schools exempted from Third Grade Reading Guarantee retention	Promotion and retention	(H.B. 409, 2020)
SY2021-22	House Bill 82 report card: 1-5 stars replace A-F grades; Early Literacy weighted 40% reading proficiency, 35% promotion, 25% improving K-3 literacy	Start of the comparable five-year series	(LSC, 2021)
Retained for SY2023-24	House Bill 33 safe harbor: students retained on SY2022-23 results must be promoted to fourth grade unless a parent requests continued retention	Promotion and exemptions	(LSC, 2023)
SY2023-24 onward	House Bill 33 (effective October 3, 2023): permanent pathway for promotion at a parent's request	Share of students exempt from the promotion threshold	(ODEW, 2026c; LSC, 2023; Ohio Rev. Code § 3313.608, 2025)
SY2024-25	House Bill 33 deadline for using only ODEW-listed, science-of-reading-aligned core curricula; alternate assessment added to the reading proficiency measure	Reading proficiency	(Henry, 2024; ODEW, 2026a; LSC, 2023)
SY2025-26	House Bill 96: promotion measure counts only students meeting test-score requirements; Early Literacy star-rating thresholds revised	Promotion rate, weighted percentage, star ratings	(H.B. 96, 2025; ODEW, n.d.-b, 2026a)
Through SY2025-26; changes SY2026-27	Kindergarten diagnostic may be the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment's language and literacy section or an approved diagnostic; the KRA is no longer permitted beginning SY2026-27	Kindergarten not-on-track rate; Improving K-3 Literacy	(ODEW, n.d.-d, 2026c)

Each of these changes had its own purpose. Taken together, they mean that a year-to-year change in the weighted percentage, the star rating, or the promotion rate can reflect a change in the rules rather than a change in students' reading. Of the component's measures, reading proficiency was defined most consistently across the five years (apart from the small alternate-assessment change in SY2024-25), which is why this brief relies on it for five-year comparisons. Anyone comparing Early Literacy results across these years should check which rules applied in each year before attributing a change to students or schools.

For SY2025-26, ODEW's data file reflects the House Bill 96 change directly, renaming the promotion column to “Percent of 3rd Graders Promoted to the Fourth Grade by Meeting Test Score Requirements” (ODEW, n.d.-b).

Five-Year Statewide Trend

Table 3

Statewide District Averages on Early Literacy Measures, SY2021-22 to SY2025-26

Statewide district average	SY21-22	SY22-23	SY23-24	SY24-25	SY25-26
Weighted component %	71.9	73.7	75.1	71.7	65.9
Reading proficiency %	66.7	69.9	71.7	65.9	68.4
Promotion to 4th grade %*	99.5	99.3	99.4	99.4	78.4
Improving K-3 Literacy % (rated districts)	35.1	37.9	40.8	37.6	39.1
Districts with Improving K-3 measure	523	523	522	538	529

Statewide district average	SY21-22	SY22-23	SY23-24	SY24-25	SY25-26
Average star rating†	2.89	3.08	3.22	2.85	2.86

Note. Simple averages across rated districts (605 in SY2021-22 to SY2024-25; 606 in SY2025-26) (ODEW, n.d.-b). *SY2025-26 counts only students meeting test-score requirements. †SY2025-26 uses the revised thresholds; under the prior thresholds, the SY2025-26 average would be 2.43.

Reading proficiency rose for three years (Table 3), from 66.7% to 71.7%, fell to 65.9% in SY2024-25, and recovered to 68.4% in SY2025-26 (ODEW, n.d.-b). The SY2024-25 decline coincided with the first year science-of-reading curricula were in use statewide (Henry, 2024); this brief does not establish that the transition caused it.

The weighted component fell 5.75 points in SY2025-26 even though reading proficiency and Improving K-3 Literacy both rose. The promotion change accounts for the decline. Among the 533 districts weighted the same way in both years, the average contributions to the change were: promotion, -7.7 points; reading proficiency, $+1.0$; Improving K-3 Literacy, $+0.6$; net, -6.0 (ODEW, n.d.-b). The drop in the promotion measure (from 99.4% to 78.4% on average) reflects the change in what the measure counts, not a one-year change in students' reading (H.B. 96, 2025; ODEW, 2026a).

The average star rating held nearly flat (2.85 to 2.86), the same year the rating thresholds were revised. Under the prior thresholds, the SY2025-26 average would have been 2.43, and 268 districts would have received a lower rating (ODEW, n.d.-b, 2026a).

Reading proficiency and promotion now use the same score on the reading subscore (50 or higher) (ODEW, 2026a). The roughly 10-point gap between them in SY2025-26 (78.4% vs. 68.4%) comes from students who met promotion another way: a 700+ ELA score with a reading subscore below 50, or the required score on an approved alternative reading assessment (ODEW, 2026a).

Promotion Under the Third Grade Reading Guarantee

ODEW's Third Grade Reading Guarantee data files report, for each district, the share of third graders exempt from the promotion threshold and, among those subject to it, the share who met it (ODEW, n.d.-c). Table 4 shows the results summed across traditional districts.

Table 4

Third Grade Reading Guarantee Promotion Results, Traditional Districts, SY2020-21 to SY2025-26

School year	3rd graders	% exempt	% met threshold	% did not meet
SY2020-21	105,463	4.5	98.9	1.1
SY2021-22	107,113	4.8	99.5	0.5
SY2022-23	107,548	6.5	98.9	1.1
SY2023-24	103,782	8.5	99.0	1.0
SY2024-25	109,830	9.2	99.1	0.9
SY2025-26	105,726	1.6	74.6	25.4

Note. Traditional districts only, summed from each year's district file (ODEW, n.d.-c). In SY2025-26, "met" includes approved alternative reading assessments (ODEW, 2026a). The SY2025-26 figure differs from the 78.4% in the trend table because this table pools students, while the trend table averages district percentages.

Through SY2024-25, about 99% of third graders subject to the threshold were reported as meeting it. In SY2025-26, the year House Bill 96's change took effect, 25.4% were reported

as not meeting it, and the exempt share fell from 9.2% to 1.6% (ODEW, n.d.-c). The files used for this brief do not break out students who met the promotion score outright, through an alternative assessment, or by parent request, so this brief makes no estimate of retention rates.

District-Level Findings

The analyses below use the 605 districts with an Early Literacy rating in all five years (ODEW, n.d.-b). District-by-district detail is available from the author.

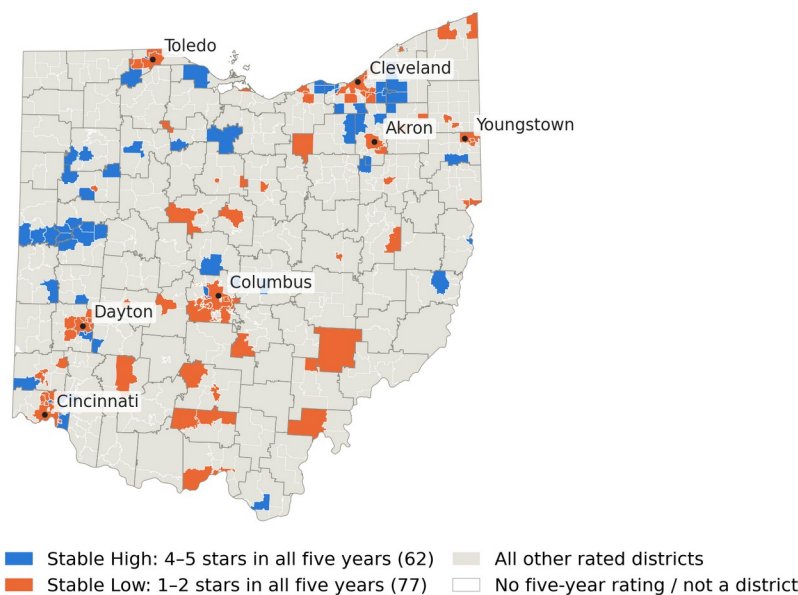
Stable Performers

Sixty-two districts received 4 or 5 stars in all five years (“Stable High”), and 77 never received more than 2 stars (“Stable Low”) (ODEW, n.d.-b). Because SY2025-26 was rated on revised thresholds (the 5-star cut rose from 88% to 89%; the 2-, 3- and 4-star cuts fell), the counts depend partly on that year's scale; rating SY2025-26 on the prior thresholds instead gives 55 Stable High and 79 Stable Low districts (ODEW, n.d.-b, 2026a). The Stable Low group includes many of Ohio's urban districts, among them Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland Municipal, Columbus, Dayton, East Cleveland, Euclid, Garfield Heights, Toledo, and Youngstown (ODEW, n.d.-b).

On a map, the two groups separate clearly (Figure 1). Stable High districts cluster in west-central Ohio (Mercer, Auglaize, Shelby, and Allen counties) and in the suburbs ringing Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbus. Stable Low districts are concentrated in the large cities and their inner-ring suburbs, but not only there: 20 of the 77 are in Ohio's 32 Appalachian counties, mostly in the south and southeast, compared with 4 of the 62 Stable High districts (ODEW, n.d.-b).

Figure 1

Districts With Stable High or Stable Low Early Literacy Ratings, SY2021-22 to SY2025-26



Note. Stable High = 4-5 stars and Stable Low = 1-2 stars on the Early Literacy component in all five years. Ratings: ODEW district data files (ODEW, n.d.-b). Boundaries: Ohio School Districts 2025 layer (Ohio Geographically Referenced Information Program [OGRIP], 2025). White areas are island districts and others without five years of ratings, or areas outside any school district.

Overlap with Chronic Absenteeism

ODEW also reports each district's chronic absenteeism rate, the share of students who miss 10% or more of their possible attendance hours for any reason (ODEW, n.d.-a, 2026b). Classifying districts as chronically high (top quartile among these districts in each of the four years SY2021-22 to SY2024-25, the most recent years available) or chronically low (bottom quartile in each of those years), 55 of the 77 Stable Low districts (71%) are chronically high, and none of the 62 Stable High districts are; 41 of the 62 (66%) are chronically low (ODEW, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). The difference between the two groups is far larger than chance would produce (Fisher's exact test, $p < .001$). Districts strong on both measures include Solon City, Mariemont City, Minster Local, New Bremen Local, Marion Local, and Fort Loramie Local.

Improvement Screen: Reading Proficiency

To find districts with sustained improvement, this screen uses reading proficiency only — the component measure defined most consistently across all five years. A district passes if its reading proficiency was higher in SY2025-26 than in SY2021-22 and it improved in at least two of the four year-to-year transitions. The five-year change is then converted to a standard score (Z) relative to all districts. Of 605 districts, 332 pass; 92 have a change more than one standard deviation above the average (a statewide average change of +1.7 points, standard deviation 9.1) and form the top tier (ODEW, n.d.-b). Table 5 shows the ten largest gains.

Table 5

Ten Largest Five-Year Gains in Reading Proficiency Among Top-Tier Districts

District	County	SY21-22 %	SY25-26 %	Change	Z	Avg. 3rd graders
Lucas Local	Richland	57.6	92.3	+34.7	3.63	31
Southern Local	Perry	54.8	80.6	+25.8	2.65	37
Eastern Local School District	Pike	62.3	87.0	+24.7	2.53	51
Chesapeake Union Exempted Village	Lawrence	73.8	97.7	+23.9	2.44	81
Switzerland of Ohio Local	Monroe	60.9	84.6	+23.7	2.42	129
Indian Lake Local	Logan	71.4	94.8	+23.4	2.39	91
Crooksville Exempted Village	Perry	46.4	69.2	+22.8	2.32	77
Holgate Local	Henry	55.6	77.8	+22.2	2.26	27
Bridgeport Exempted Village	Belmont	59.3	81.4	+22.1	2.25	55
Plymouth-Shiloh Local	Richland	46.5	67.9	+21.4	2.17	46

Note. Reading proficiency, district level (ODEW, n.d.-b). “Avg. 3rd graders” is the average number subject to the promotion threshold, SY2021-22 to SY2025-26 (ODEW, n.d.-c). The full list of 92 is available from the author.

Two cautions apply. First, many of these districts are small: the median top-tier district has about 73 third graders a year, compared with about 103 for all districts, and a single year's cohort in a small district can swing sharply. Second, this is a screen for districts worth a closer look, not evidence of what caused their results. With that said, the top tier is disproportionately Appalachian: 45% are in Ohio's 32 Appalachian counties, compared with 28% of all districts.

What This Means

Read year to year, the weighted Early Literacy percentage fell for two straight years, SY2023-24 to SY2025-26. The underlying data tell a more specific story. Reading proficiency rose for three years, dipped in SY2024-25, and partly recovered in SY2025-26. Improving K-3 Literacy followed a similar pattern. The SY2025-26 decline in the weighted component comes from a change in what the promotion measure counts, and the steady average star rating that year reflects the revised rating scale. Neither reflects a one-year change in students' reading.

For districts and educational service centers, the distinction matters in practice. A district whose weighted score fell in SY2025-26 mainly because of the promotion redefinition faces a different question than one whose reading proficiency is declining. The overlap with chronic absenteeism suggests that, for the most persistently struggling districts, literacy and attendance supports belong in the same plan.

Limitations

This is district-level data. It can identify patterns and districts worth a closer look; it cannot show what caused any district's results or whether retention helps the students retained. Star ratings are not comparable across the SY2025-26 threshold change. The chronic-absenteeism comparison covers four years rather than five because SY2025-26 district attendance data were not yet available. This is an independent analysis of public ODEW data.

Methods and Authorship

Michael L. Fuller, Ph.D., designed the study, obtained the ODEW data and source documents, directed the analysis, and verified every factual claim against its cited source. Claude, an AI system (Anthropic), assisted with data processing, calculations, and drafting. A companion workbook documenting each calculation and the source for every claim is available from the author.

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