

Middle Schoolers' Reading Scores Are Still Stuck at Post-Pandemic Lows

EdWeek, By [Sarah Schwartz](#) — August 04, 2026



Sixth graders read a passage and give constructive feedback to their partners during Nancy Barajas' class at Fairview Elementary School on May 6, 2026, in Modesto, Calif. New research shows the nation's 6th graders' reading scores have flatlined, and the lowest-performing students are losing ground.

New data underscores a troubling trend: Middle schoolers' reading scores are stuck at post-pandemic lows, even as younger students show some signs of academic recovery.

The [research](#), from the assessment and research organization NWEA, examines 6th graders' reading scores on the company's MAP Growth tests between 2017 and 2025.

On average, 6th graders lost ground between 2019 and 2021, during the height of COVID-related school disruptions. But after that, achievement trends began to diverge for students who were already stronger readers before the pandemic began, and students who were struggling.

[Should Teachers Allow Students to Redo Classwork? Allowing students to redo assignments is another aspect of the traditional grading debate.](#)

Sixth graders who were at 90th percentile and the 50th percentile in 2019 saw their scores flatline starting in 2022. But students at the 10th percentile have continued to lose ground, with achievement dropping further year after year.

These patterns reinforce other data. Over the past two years, two sets of results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress have shown middle schoolers' reading scores [continuing to fall](#) or [stagnating](#), with the lowest-performing students driving the decline.

But the MAP test data provides more evidence for the phenomenon and shows that scores for struggling students are on a steady downward trajectory, said Megan Kuhfeld, the director of growth modeling and data analytics at NWEA, and an author on the brief.

“Whenever something replicates across data sets, it gives us a stronger signal,” she said.

And while NAEP results report on 8th graders, NWEA’s data shows that similar trends exist for younger middle schoolers, Kuhfeld said.

“This story is not just the elder middle schoolers,” she said. “It’s really happening across grade bands.”

Some states extend reading support to upper grades

Though there’s mounting evidence that middle school students need more reading support, figuring out exactly how to provide it can pose significant challenges for schools and districts.

The “science of reading” movement, an effort to align early reading instruction with evidence-based practice, has reshaped elementary schools’ approaches to literacy instruction over the past decade. It focused largely on phonics and fluency, although more recently states have been looking at how those elements also need to dovetail with vocabulary, variety of complex texts, and content knowledge.

Almost every state has passed legislation requiring or encouraging schools to use teaching methods aligned with the research base on how young children learn to read. Across the country, many districts have overhauled curriculum and retooled intervention schedules. Hundreds of thousands of teachers have been trained in new instructional practices.

Some advocates have attributed recent, modest gains in national reading scores for elementary school students to these reforms. At the state level, several states, including Mississippi and Louisiana, have seen elementary school students make big jumps on national tests.

But that same momentum hasn’t yet reached middle school. Legislative efforts targeted at those grades are fewer. “It’s still a bit more piecemeal than the comprehensive approach we’ve seen in the early grades,” Kuhfeld said.

Several states—including Indiana, Mississippi, and Virginia—have required screening and intervention systems to extend through 8th grade. Others, such as Minnesota and

Maryland, have included foundational literacy expectations past early elementary school, with the intent to get students who are still struggling the help they need.

Implementing these mandates could prove complicated though, as most middle schools aren't designed to provide extensive reading support in the same way elementary schools are. Schools [might not have dedicated time for reading intervention in the schedule](#), for example, or have enough reading specialists.

It's likely that many students at or below the 10th percentile on MAP Growth need support with foundational skills—something that middle school teachers who are trained in teaching to grade-level standards often aren't equipped to provide, said Kuhfeld.

But even if older readers' challenges lie at the word level, [they often need different phonics interventions than their younger counterparts](#), researchers say. Most middle and high schoolers who struggle to read words can sound out phonetically regular words like “cat” or “big,” but struggle with more complex, multisyllabic words.

And not all older readers have trouble decoding. Understanding vocabulary or parsing text structure, for example, can be bigger stumbling blocks in upper elementary and middle school grades, as texts become more complex and sentence structure more varied.

This complexity means that diagnostic tests that can precisely identify students' areas of need are important at the middle school level, the NWEA report's authors write, “in order to make the best use of limited instructional time.”