

LEVERAGING LITERACY

The Path to Education
Recovery in New Jersey

A JERSEYCAN REPORT



2023

About This Framework

Over the past decade, JerseyCAN has cemented its place on the New Jersey education landscape as the organization most relentlessly concerned with making sure that each child in New Jersey has access to a high-quality education, regardless of background or circumstance. As a natural outgrowth of its long-standing commitment to universal access to a high-quality education, JerseyCAN published the report, “A Time to Act: A Framework to Accelerate Learning”, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our goal then, was to provide a blueprint for the state to redeem the dire, unfortunate crisis of the pandemic into an opportunity to make substantive educational change. In that report, we expounded on practice-proven strategies to accelerate learning as well as promising strategies that emerged during the pandemic to meet the moment.

Now, more than a year later, we are able to learn from the natural experiment emanating from varied responses to learning recovery during this pivotal time in our country’s history. With student data on learning outcomes, we now know without ambiguity, what we must do to stem the tide of further education decline.

The answer is an unwavering commitment to the Science of Reading, the details of which we share and discuss in this report. The results as shown by the data are jarring; they make it clear that we do not have the luxury of time to proverbially “tinker at the edges” to make a change.

JerseyCAN recognizes this moment as one in which to enact expansive, comprehensive change, the kind that places substantially more children on the path to grade-level learning and lifelong success than ever before.

As a benchmark grade for reading mastery, this report looks at 3rd grade statewide data in the aggregate as well as district-level data from some of New Jersey’s largest and most challenged school districts, and identifies literacy-based strategies that other similarly-positioned districts have employed to place students squarely on the road to learning recovery.

In this report, we assert that given the low and declining reading capacity of our K-12 learners, an overhaul of reading instruction in New Jersey is the best hope we have to recover learning that was lost. We preview the path that must be taken to achieve a reading revolution and expound on the work that JerseyCAN is presently doing to lead on this front. Our paramount goal is to lead a cadre of reading evangelists that will educate and push legislators to champion reading by passing laws that make good reading instruction possible, and obligatory in the state of New Jersey.



Paula White
Executive Director, JerseyCAN

Framework to Accelerate Learning

Effective Resource Allocation for Equitable Systems

Student and Family Engagement

Data for Understanding Student Learning

High Quality, Inclusive Curriculum, Instruction and Training

Educator Support and Innovative Staffing

The New Jersey Education Landscape

Armed with the knowledge that reading mastery is the fundamental building block for all other meaningful learning, twenty-six years ago, the United States Congress issued an edict that a national panel should be convened to evaluate the status of reading research and identify the relative effectiveness of varied reading approaches. The panel included scientists, researchers, parents and classroom practitioners. After their review of a copious number of studies, in 2000 they published their report making their recommendations which then formed the basis of reading policy and instruction for several states across America.

In 2023, New Jersey has yet to implement the National Reading Panel's recommendations in any remotely meaningful way and while masked by New Jersey's relatively higher rankings in education outcomes than other states, the results of the state's reticence to follow the lead of the science on reading has been alarming, to say the least. Most significantly, the achievement gap in reading remained essentially unchanged for over a decade and has now widened since the

pandemic ensued. New Jersey was unable to withstand the pandemic's assault on education, and was among 30 states whose fourth-grade reading scores declined on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), also dubbed "the nation's report card".

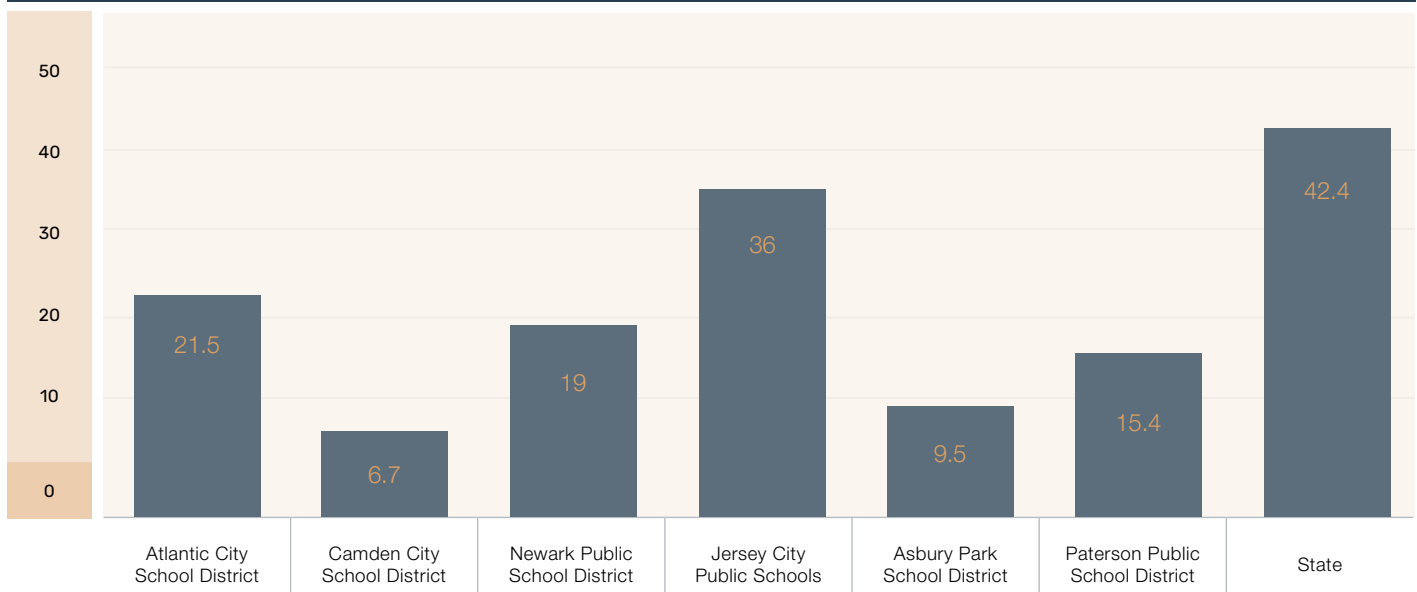
Reading outcomes on state-based assessments paint an equally dismal picture, many plummeting to a level lower than pre-pandemic levels.

As the data snapshot below shows, New Jersey's charge to deliver a free and appropriate public education to its children is coming up decisively short. This makes a clear case for the scope of work in education recovery that New Jersey's education champions must do, and JerseyCAN is leading this charge.

“When a child is given the opportunity to walk into a school district to develop their God-given potential, the outcomes can be extraordinary. We are falling short on that right now.”

Senator M. Teresa Ruiz
Senate Majority Leader, New Jersey.

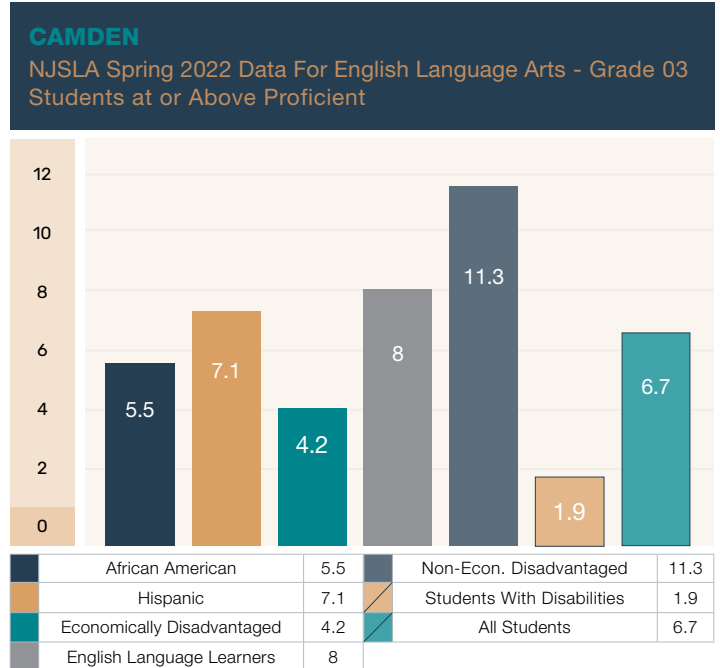
NJSLA Spring 2022 Data For English Language Arts - Grade 03 Students at or Above Proficient



What does the data show?

The most cursory look at the data showing 3rd grade level reading mastery in Camden, New Jersey reveals an ominous foreshadowing of trouble ahead. At best, only 11% of any demographic subgroup in the district can read effectively at the most pivotal grade in elementary school. A prescient academic adage states that children are learning to read up until 3rd grade, and at 4th grade and beyond they are reading to learn. With such low reading mastery including barely 1 in 20 African American 3rd graders reading appropriately, no amount of economic investment in local communities will be able to compensate for such profound lack of preparedness of a populace as they will be unable to capitalize on any opportunities secured for the region.

A prime example of such opportunity is with Camden's Urban Enterprise Zone (UEZ) designation which provides significant funding to businesses to create private sector jobs through both public and private investments. Thousands of businesses are eligible to benefit from this program but if they are unable to match the jobs they have with the skills of the persons living in the community, the sole alternative will be to bring educated, skilled persons into Camden while those already living in the community continue to languish in the underclass. This is the problem that access to a high-quality K-12 education must be designed to solve.



POLICY PUSH TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

Science of Reading (SOR) Training for Classroom Practitioners

New Jersey is now in the minority of states that do not provide in-service classroom teachers professional development training aligned to the Science of Reading. The state neither guarantees access to such training nor does it require that teachers receive it. This is unacceptable, given the dismal state of reading mastery in New Jersey.

In Massachusetts, a state department of education initiative called [Mass Literacy](#) allows teachers to opt in to professional learning that is grounded in evidence-based Science of Reading literacy practices, and teachers receive a small stipend for doing so.

Massachusetts' efforts are a step in the right direction but JerseyCAN is more supportive of Tennessee's approach, which mandates science of reading training for K-3 teachers in Tennessee; [it is working](#) - reading

scores are going up and the overwhelming majority of teachers who receive this training find it to be to their advantage in the classroom.

JerseyCAN's detailed data analysis of reading outcomes in the state has led us to prioritize the introduction and passage of legislation that places Science of Reading training as a must-have for classroom teachers. We believe that it is unconscionable to raise the bar for our children if their teachers are not prepared to deliver the kind of instruction that will make that bar reachable.

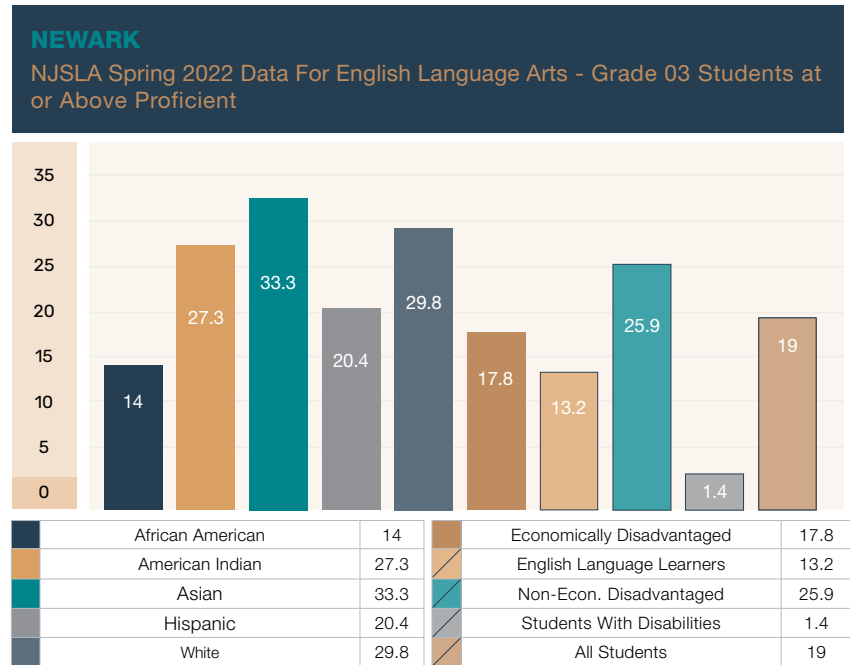
Teachers must be trained, coached and supported to deliver success for our students, As such, Science of Reading training for New Jersey's K-3 teacher cohort must be a fully-funded mandate for the state.

What does the data show?

Students in Newark comprise New Jersey’s largest school district, thus making the academic health of Newark’s children a bellwether for the state’s educational wellbeing. The data is concerning, as encapsulated [in a recent news article](#) which stated, “Third grade scores recently released by the New Jersey Department of Education suggest a dire literacy problem in each of Newark’s wards.”

The literacy challenges of Newark’s students are profound and a sizeable number of new teachers are hired by the Newark Board of Education each year to meet this need. In 2021, [Newark hired 350 new teachers](#), a number that ballooned to [600 new hires in 2022](#). These teachers were sourced significantly from teacher pipeline partnerships that Newark has forged with New Jersey’s universities, including Montclair State University and Rutgers University-Newark. Unfortunately, a recent report from the National Center for Teacher Quality found that New Jersey’s teacher preparation programs are among the worst in the nation for providing teacher education aligned with the Science of Reading.

With a mere 19% of students in the district reading at grade level and hundreds of new teachers being hired each year, Newark can ill-afford to onboard educators that will unwittingly perpetuate the district’s literacy acquisition problem. Regrettably, with a teacher shortage conundrum and many vacancies to fill, this is what can and does occur.



POLICY PUSH TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

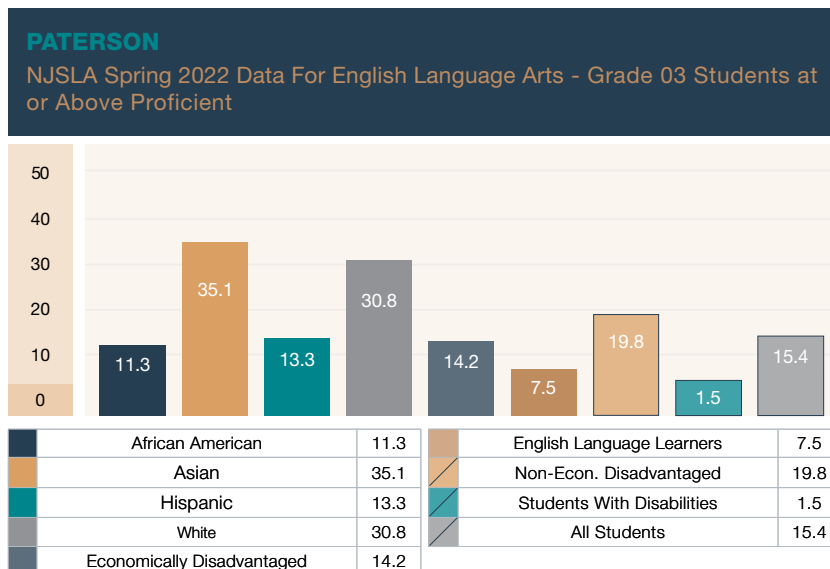
Teacher Preparation Programs Aligned to the Science of Reading

Newark’s student achievement data and teacher workforce demands make a cogent case for teacher preparation programs aligned to the Science of Reading (SOR) to address the reading problem upstream, instead of using the inefficient, perpetually corrective approach now in use. Changes in teacher preparation is an issue that must be proactively addressed. An effort to align the approach to the teaching of reading in higher education to the Science of Reading was done in Mississippi where reading outcomes have shown significant, quantifiable improvement.

Recent legislation in Georgia mandated that the state department “...shall require teachers in all programs licensed or commissioned by the department to receive training on developmentally appropriate evidence based literacy instruction...” Preservice teacher preparation is a key component of a sustainable solution to the state’s problem of churning out far too many non-proficient readers from our schools into college and the workforce year after year. For this reason, JerseyCAN is working to ensure that a bill is passed that will serve as a mandate and a quality control measure for colleges and universities to align their programs to the Science of Reading.

What does the data show?

Twenty-five thousand children in Paterson rely on the city’s public schools for their education but the data show that a significant proportion of the student body have unmet literacy needs. The most promising 3rd grade reading outcome is in the Asian student population and that number stands at only 35%, and the overall 3rd grade proficiency is much worse at only 15.4%. Economic disadvantage appears to have limited impact on students’ reading achievement as 14.2% of economically disadvantaged 3rd grade students are reading at grade level, while only a marginally higher percentage - 19.8% - of non-economically disadvantaged students show 3rd grade reading proficiency. This finding arguably suggests that the scope and focus of instructional attention is a more notable problem than the poverty levels of students in the district.



POLICY PUSH TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

Universal Literacy Screening in the Earliest Grades

Early intervention improves literacy learning outcomes. For this reason, students in Arizona in Kindergarten through third grade are administered a universal reading screener. In light of this, universal literacy screening has been a constant feature in Uncommon Schools in Newark, a key factor that has led to their reading scores routinely far outpacing the city and also outpacing the state, defying what many believe to be possible for the Black and Brown children - most living in poverty - that they serve. The state places parameters stipulating that the screener must be aligned to the Science of Reading and that it must be administered within 45 days of the beginning of the school year. It also establishes subsequent dates throughout the year when the screener must be used again to gauge progress and further mandates that the data must be submitted to the Arizona Department of Education.

To recover learning to at least pre-pandemic levels and establish a standard for reading mastery that far surpasses the pre-pandemic benchmark, JerseyCAN is advocating for legislation similar to the one found in Arizona. We believe that passage of universal screener legislation will nudge districts and schools to prioritize and identify students’ literacy knowledge, and fine tune interventions to match students’ specific knowledge gaps so that subsequent progress along the reading continuum can more predictably occur. A mandate to screen and report on students’ literacy acquisition incrementally over time is a crucial piece of a comprehensive effort to improve outcomes in districts like Paterson, where factors such as non-English speaking households and a high percentage of students living in poverty make it less likely for literacy acquisition to be fully supported at home.



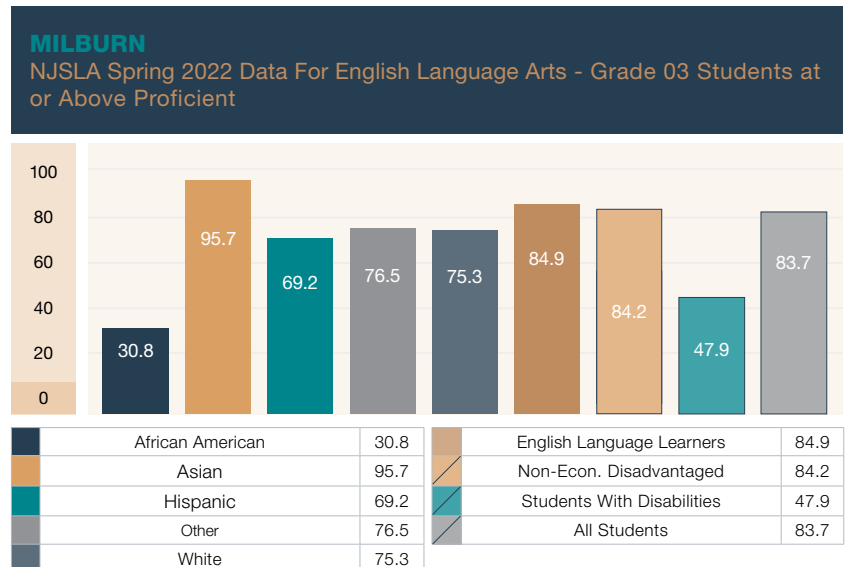
What does the data show?

Since the pandemic occurred, JerseyCAN's heightened focus on learning recovery has invited more data scrutiny for students' academic outcomes, and our findings are not as uniformly predictable as previous education trends might suggest. Nowhere is this more evident than in the affluent town of Millburn, [one of New Jersey's highest-income communities](#).

While it may not be surprising that virtually 100% of Asian students and 3 out of 4 white students are reading at grade level there in 3rd grade, it is unusual yet encouraging to note that 84.9% of English learners are reading at grade level in the district, and that at 47.9%, the reading proficiency rate of 3rd grade students with disabilities exceeds the state average by more than 5%. However, if one were to make an assumption that all is well with every student population in this wealthy, high-performing district, they would be wrong.

The severe underperformance of Black 3rd graders in the district is jarring, as only 30.8% of this demographic group showed reading proficiency in 3rd grade. With such a low reading proficiency rate - more than two times lower than white students in the district - this goes far beyond an achievement gap. Indeed, the black-white difference in student outcomes in Millburn constitutes an achievement gulf.

There are other communities like Millburn where similar Black-white and other achievement gulfs are hidden below the surface in high-performing districts, lulling residents into a sense of complacency that things are fine for all students in their schools. Without an explicit accountability measure for advising parents of their children's reading status, this information will far too often escape their radar, thus calcifying an unacceptable status quo.



POLICY PUSH TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

Parent Notification re: Students with Reading Deficiencies

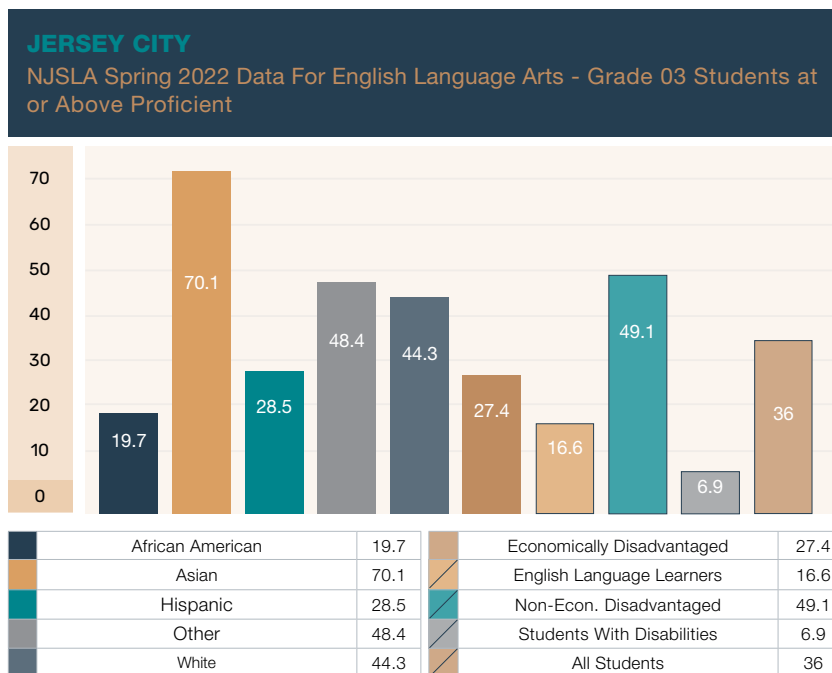
[Massachusetts has passed reading legislation that goes into effect on July 1, 2023](#). It includes mandated notification to parents of students identified with reading deficiencies, which is an accountability component that parent advocates, teachers and policymakers all agree is necessary. The endorsement of this policy is echoed by the various parent advocacy groups that comprise JerseyCAN's literacy coalition, and by the inaugural JerseyCAN Parent Fellowship cohort that our organization launched this year. Parent notification of reading deficiencies is a facet of public education that will help to build a groundswell of support across the state for change; JerseyCAN recommends and will pursue this measure.

What does the data show?

The New York Times reported in 2022, that Jersey City was the most expensive city in America to rent a home. Considering the value bestowed on this locale, it nonetheless has a considerable amount of work to do to ensure that a high percentage of 3rd grade students can read proficiently across all demographic groups in the city.

Curriculum is a local decision, but districts are not always informed or amenable to using the most effective curriculum and often curriculum varies widely from school to school within a single district. While Jersey City’s 3rd grade student performance in reading is not the worst in the state, African-American, Hispanic, English Learners and economically disadvantaged students all fall below the state average in reading proficiency.

English Learners in Jersey City hear various languages spoken at home, including Arabic, Gujarati, Hindu, Spanish and Urdu. All districts, and certainly diverse districts like Jersey City would benefit from adhering to a defined standard for selected reading instruction materials across the school system as a stop gap for preventing ineffective curricula and instructional materials to proliferate in schools.



POLICY PUSH TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

Adoption of High-Quality Instructional and Curricular Materials

The entire state of New Jersey and the city of New York each serve over a million children in their public schools. Earlier this year, New York City took a bold step to improve literacy instruction and outcomes across their entire district by identifying three science of reading-aligned curricula from which all schools must choose in the upcoming school year.

JerseyCAN is advocating for the same approach to be taken in New Jersey in the fashion that emerges to be the most feasible since unlike New York City, we are not one district but in fact hundreds of districts across the state. Since curriculum is a local decision in our state, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) cannot mandate curricular decisions.

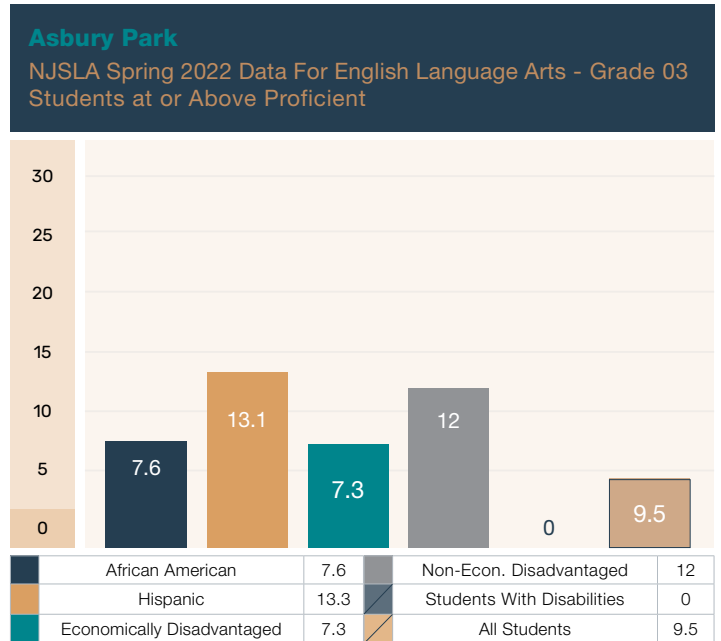
However, to advance literacy as the linchpin for education recovery, we will push the NJDOE to create an incentive structure and strong guidance for districts to confine the use of reading curricula to only specific curricula that has been vetted by literacy scholars or evaluative bodies such as EdReports.org to be aligned to the Science of Reading and otherwise of high quality.



What does the data show?

A lack of fiscal resources to improve education ranks consistently among the most prevalent factors identified by educators and other community stakeholders as a lever for improvement. But what happens when proof points exist refuting the notion that more money will translate to better outcomes?

For years, the Asbury Park school district in New Jersey had the highest per pupil expenditure in the state. That is no longer the case, but they still have an outsized per pupil allocation compared to most districts and are [the highest in their peer group at \\$27,977](#) per student. However the district ranks among the worst of the worst in the state in teaching students to read. A similar district, Lakewood Public Schools, does a better job with fewer resources. This is also true of College Achieve Greater Asbury Park Charter School (CAPS), which yields far greater literacy outcomes for students in the Asbury Park community than the cash-heavy Asbury Park school district. For this reason, we cannot overlook the issue of effective resource allocation for equitable systems.



POLICY PUSH TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

Effective Resource Allocation for Equitable Systems

As an organization with a watchdog function, JerseyCAN understands that it is not enough to pass good legislation or mandate a certain well-meaning action - systems must be monitored to ensure that resources are being prudently allocated to serve the overarching purpose and goal. If salaries are being paid to ineffective teachers, improvement will not occur, nor will it happen if dollars are being spent to purchase low-quality curricular products, or if the leadership in school districts is not of high quality. JerseyCAN will point out school districts and systems where effective resource allocation is challenging and call for monitoring or radical change because no matter the plan, an unfunded mandate or misaligned spending will reliably sabotage the most ambitious efforts for change.



Summary of Recommendations & Next Steps

There is no shortage of data, articles and reports that speak to the education crisis facing children in New Jersey today, but none of it matters without a plan of action. This brief reflects the integration of the data from the New Jersey Department of Education, which we advocated successfully to have published on an accelerated timeline in the public domain, with the amalgam of actions that must be taken, legislatively and otherwise, to facilitate education recovery in a meaningful way. Meaningful improvement means that which will provide immediate gains and also inject momentum for continued growth in learning for our students in years to come.

As our name implies, JerseyCAN believes that we “can”; we believe in the power of our organization to make a change, and we have copious evidence of having moved the needle on the New Jersey educational landscape in areas as varied as facilities funding, teacher workforce development and high-quality student tutoring. With our commitment to a literacy overhaul, we tackle a mammoth problem and as such, we are marshaling the troops of community-based organizations and entities in advocacy, parenting, and education to learn from them, educate them, and to work more closely together to achieve a seismic shift in reading in our state. Our newly-formed New Jersey Legacy of Literacy (NJLL) Coalition will shepherd this work, as encapsulated in this report.

In sum, we are devoted to an unrelenting push for the following outcomes, which are reliably and consistently associated with better student learning:

- Comprehensive Science of Reading (SOR) training afforded to K-3 reading teachers, and in more abbreviated fashion to teachers of other subjects and grades.
- Teacher preparation programs for pre-service teachers in New Jersey’s colleges and universities that are fully aligned with the Science of Reading.
- Universal screeners to identify students’ entry point along the continuum of reading, and subsequent assessment for learning touchpoints to plan for continuous improvement.

- Notification to parents of students identified with reading deficiencies, to facilitate plans for support.
- School district adoption of high quality instructional and curricular materials that align with the Science of Reading.
- Effective resource allocation for equitable systems so that financial investments will not be disconnected from student learning but rather yield student improvement.

We will lead steadfastly on advancing the cause of education recovery and share our progress along the way. JerseyCAN is indebted to our philanthropic and funding partners, our JerseyCAN and 50CAN team, and the community and state partners whose thought partnership deepens our knowledge and supports and informs our work.



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