



K-3 Literacy in Kentucky: Progress, Practices, And Policy Considerations

Presentation to the
Education Accountability and Assessment Review Subcommittee by the
Office of Education Accountability
October 6, 2026

Major Findings

- Almost all districts have adopted evidence-based reading programs, universal screeners, and diagnostic assessments
- KY reading scores have increased since SY 2022, despite decreases across nation
- Progress has been uneven among districts and schools and proficiency remains very low in at least 10 percent of districts and schools
- Districts and schools vary greatly in how they use universal screener data to identify students for reading improvement plans or retention

Outline

- Background
- District Implementation
- District And School Performance
- Conclusion

Data Sources

- Office of Education Accountability (OEA)
 - Survey of all districts*
 - Survey of K-3 teachers**
 - Interviews with KDE staff and staff in 6 districts***
- Kentucky Department of Education (KDE)
 - 3rd grade Kentucky Summative Assessment reading scores, school year 2025
 - Demographic and program data
 - Grants, LETRS completion, and other program information

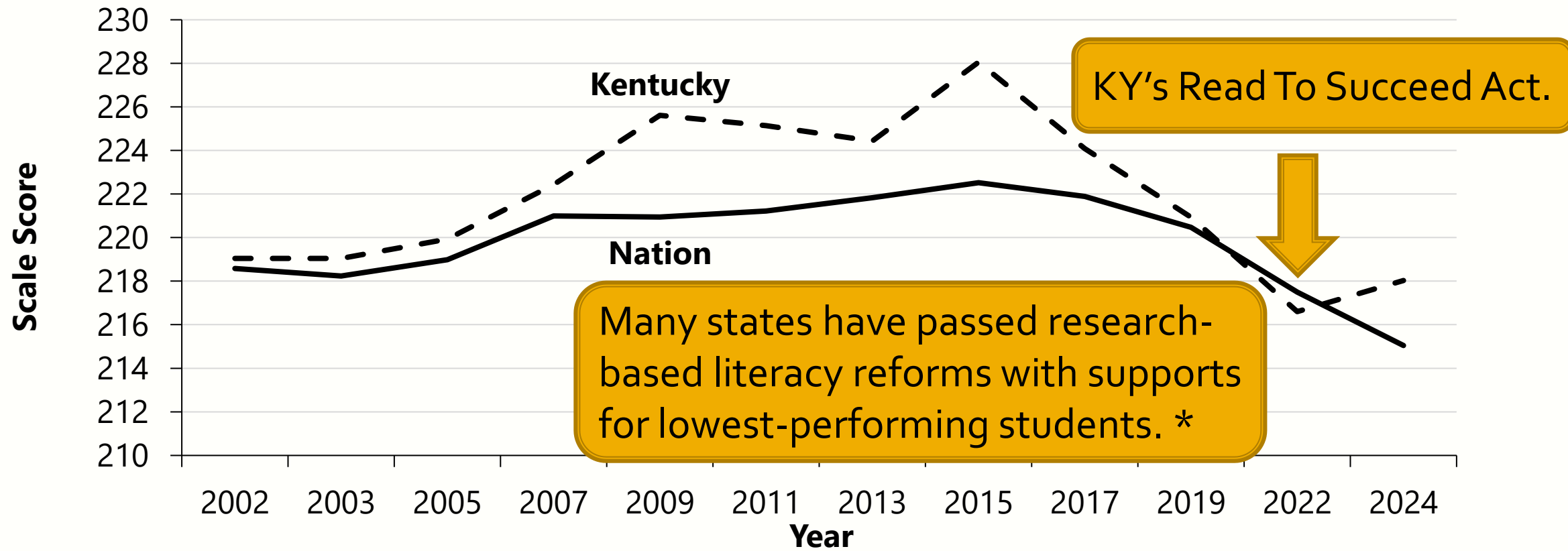
Reliable data on K-1 students meeting grade-level benchmarks were not available for the study

*OEA received responses from 167 of 171 districts. When possible, district self-report was verified with data from KDE.

**OEA surveyed classroom teachers and exceptional child teachers providing instruction in grades K-3; due to low response rates, these data provide context but are only used to support conclusions if verified by other sources.

*** To inform survey development, OEA interviewed superintendents and district literacy staff in 6 districts geographically and demographically representative of the state.

4th Grade NAEP Reading Kentucky And Nation, 2002-2024



*Appendix B shows substantial gains in Mississippi during a period of national decline. Mississippi has gained special attention for its early literacy reforms.

Kentucky K-3 Literacy Policies

- Kentucky's Read to Succeed Act of 2022 and subsequent legislation required that school districts:
 - adopt evidence-based, KDE-approved reading programs, universal screeners, and diagnostic assessments, aligned with the "science of reading";
 - implement multi-tiered systems of support;
 - use universal screener data to identify K-3 students for reading improvement plans and, beginning in SY 2026, retention in first grade (required) or kindergarten (permitted); and
 - provide parents of struggling students with read-at-home plans and progress updates.

Early Literacy Supports

- State Funded:
 - Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETsRs)
(2-year foundational course in the science of reading)
 - Literacy coaching specialists
 - Reading Diagnostic And Intervention Fund mini grants
 - Read To Achieve (RTA) grants
- Federally Funded:
 - Kentucky Comprehensive Literacy grants (KyCL)
 - Comprehensive Support And Improvement grants (CSI)

Reading Retention Policies In Other States

- Many states have implemented 3rd grade retention policies*
- Short- and long-term effects continue to be debated, but research suggests retention is most successful when:
 - Part of a comprehensive system
 - Associated with supports
 - Changes behavior of educators and parents
 - Clear thresholds may help increase support for students in danger of retention
- To address measurement challenges, other states often include
 - Test retakes
 - Good cause exemptions

*Approximately 18 as of 2026

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- Background
- District Implementation
 - Instructional materials and assessments
 - Use of universal screener for improvement plans or retention
 - Teacher feedback
- District And School Performance
- Conclusions

District Adoption Of Evidence-Based Literacy Program Elements

Required Program Elements	Districts Reporting Adoption	
	Number	Percent
KDE-approved common comprehensive reading program	165	96%
KDE-approved universal screener	170	99
KDE-approved diagnostic assessment	170	99
Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)	171	100

Source: OEA K-3 literacy district survey and data provided by districts to the Kentucky Department of Education. Appendix D shows the reading programs and assessments adopted by individual districts.

Implementation Varies Among Districts And Schools

- Minimum instructional time for literacy
 - Ranges from 1 hour to over 2.5 hours
- Types and duration of interventions
- Supports provided to students outside of the school day or year
- Professional development and teacher support
 - Educators LETRS completion by district ranged from none (15 districts) to 100 percent (5 districts)
- District formative or interim assessments
 - Almost half of districts administer districtwide assessments in addition to a universal screener

Use Of Universal Screeners To Identify Students For Intervention Or Retention

- Policy functions of universal screeners
 - Identify students who need reading improvement plans (RIPs)
 - Identify students with RIPs for retention if they do not meet "grade-level benchmarks" during the school year
 - Permitted in kindergarten
 - Required for first grade
- The most commonly selected universal screeners are:
 - i-Ready Diagnostic (75 districts)
 - Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Growth (55 districts)
 - STAR Literacy Assessments (29 districts)

Use of multiple screeners makes it difficult to establish clear statewide thresholds; terminology to describe performance differs among screeners

Sources Of Variation Among Districts In Use of Screener Data For Retention

- Role of district in setting performance expectations associated with grade-level benchmark
 - Less than half (48 percent) set districtwide expectations
 - Otherwise set at the school level
 - Schoolwide
 - Teacher teams
 - Individual teacher
- Broad range in screener score set by district to determine grade-level benchmark
 - Ranges from 5th to 50th percentile*

*while districts most often reported use of percentile ranks to set thresholds for grade-level benchmarks, vendors use scale scores to set grade-level thresholds.

Sources Of Variation Among Districts In Use of Screener Data For Retention

- Required versus potential retention of first-grade students who do not meet grade-level benchmarks*
 - 15 percent of districts require retention based on screener data alone
 - 33 percent of districts use multiple sources of data to make retention decisions
 - 4 percent of districts do not use screener data to make retention decisions
 - Most remaining districts delegate decision to schools

* KRS 158.305(9)(a)(s) states that a student who does not meet grade level benchmarks on the universal screener during the school year must be retained.

Retention-Related Challenges

- Many district survey respondents indicated measurement concerns with using universal screener data alone to make retention decisions
 - Students may not meet screener benchmarks but appear prepared for the next grade on district formative or interim assessments
- 1/3 of districts indicated that they anticipated challenges in meeting statutory requirements for 1st-grade retention
 - Capacity to accommodate large numbers of retained students
 - Communicating necessity of retention to parents, especially if regional standards differ

Teacher Feedback: Meeting Students Needs

- Almost all teachers (95 percent) reported being able to meet at least the basic needs of students on grade level
- One third or more felt unable to meet basic needs of students
 - far below grade level (41 percent)
 - with limited English proficiency (34 percent)
 - with disabilities (32 percent)
 - Only 23 percent agreed that their schools had resources to support students with characteristics of dyslexia

Teacher Feedback: Challenges In Meeting Students' Literacy Needs

Challenge	Percent Of Teachers Reporting A Strong or Extreme Challenge
Student misconduct*	53%
Lack of parental support	51
Insufficient support staff to meet student needs	43
Insufficient planning time	34
Large class size	33
Insufficient instructional time	18

*Also identified as a top challenge in recent evaluation of Kentucky's Read To Achieve grant.

Source OEA K-3 literacy teacher survey.

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KSA Reading Proficiency Rates

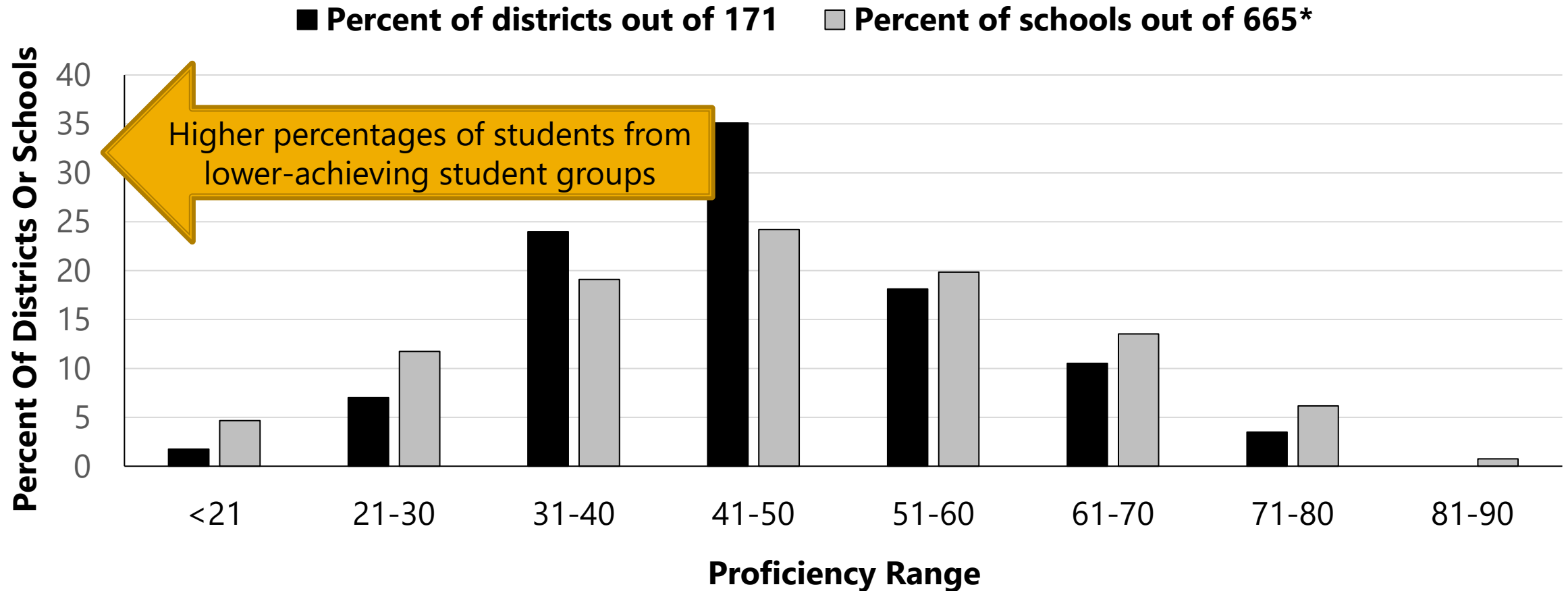
SY 2022-SY 2025

Grade	2022	2023	2024	2025	Change 2022- 2025
3	45%	46%	47%	47%	2%
4	46	48	50	50	4
5	45	48	46	50	5

Source: Kentucky Department of Education

Progress uneven: about one third of districts increased by 5 percentage points or more in 3rd grade while almost one fourth decreased by five percentage points or more.

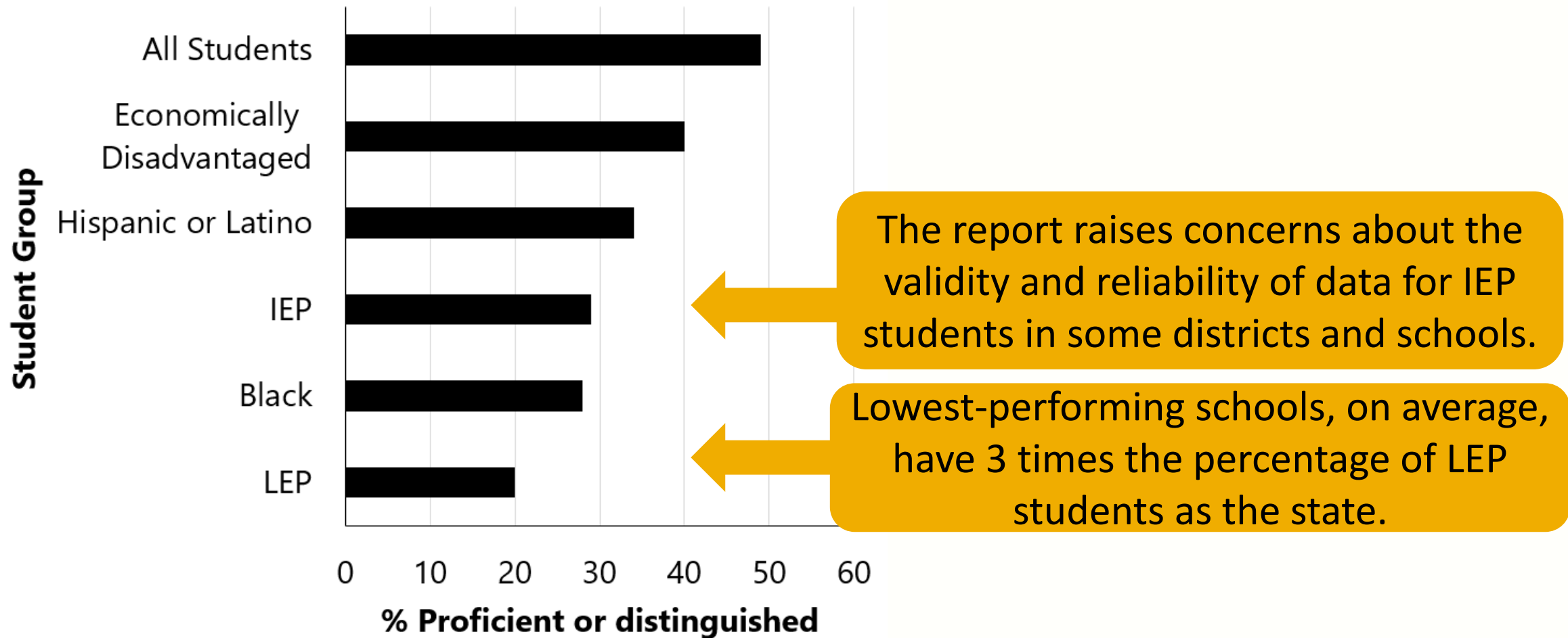
3rd Grade Proficiency Rates By District And School, KSA SY 2025



*Some schools excluded due to federal reporting rules related to student privacy.

Source: Staff analysis of data from the Kentucky Department of Education

KSA Reading Proficiency Rates By Student Group, SY 2025

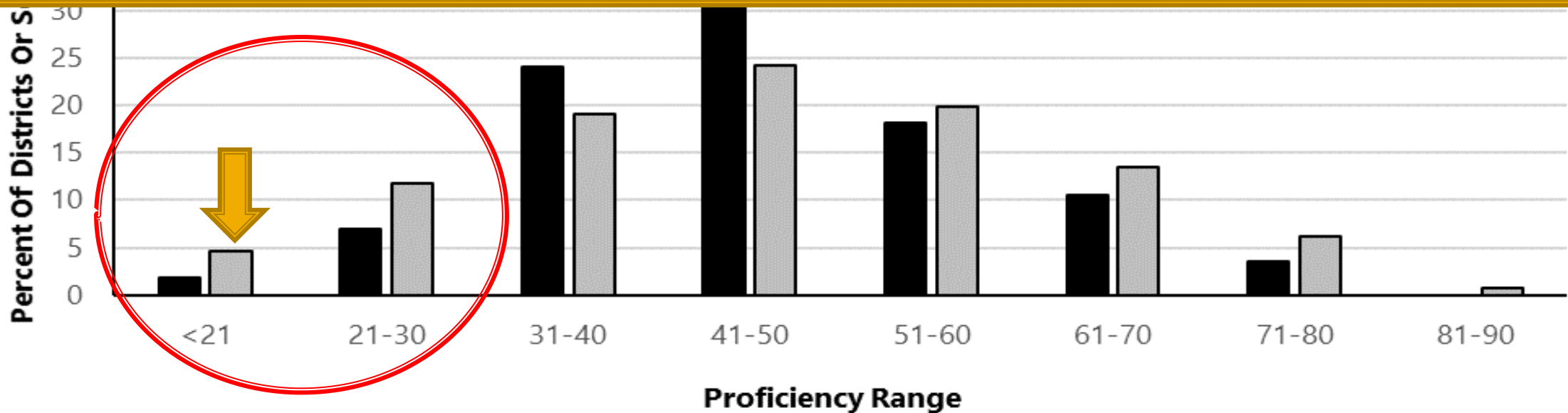


Note: IEP = individualized educational program; LEP = limited English proficiency

Source: Data from the Kentucky Department of Education

3rd Grade Proficiency Rates By District And School, KSA SY 2025

Most schools in this group have received or are in the process of receiving support from an RTA grant, literacy coach, or federal CSI grant. These supports may not address some of the challenges associated with lower reading performance in particular schools.



More than 10 percent of all districts and schools are very low performing, even when student demographic characteristics are taken into account.

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Conclusions

- Almost all districts have adopted KDE-approved comprehensive reading programs, screening and diagnostic assessments
- Reading proficiency has increased steadily in the commonwealth, even as scores continued to decrease across the nation
- Progress is uneven and third grade performance remains very low in at least 10 percent of districts and schools
 - Many interventions are currently in place in lowest-performing schools
 - Some schools may face challenges beyond early literacy practices generally
- Districts vary broadly in methods used to identify students for reading improvement plans and retention
 - Performance expectations and actions to assist students vary among districts and schools

Considerations For The General Assembly

- clarify minimum universal screener thresholds that districts must use to identify students who require reading improvement plans or who must be retained
- clarify whether students must be identified for retention based on universal screener data alone or whether other types of data may be used in combination
- provide for the possibility of test retakes and additional good cause exemptions

Considerations For The General Assembly

- require clear communication about the thresholds for retention with parents or guardians whose students are in danger of being retained
- require KDE to develop and disseminate guidance to school districts based on these clarifications
- based on evaluation data demonstrating effects of existing grants or supports, consider extending or expanding support for lowest-performing schools or districts

END

KRS 158.305(9)(a)(2)

Beginning the 2025-2026 school year:

A first-grade student who had a reading improvement plan for the school year shall remain in first grade for an additional school year if a school determines that the student:

- a. Did not meet grade level benchmarks in reading while in first grade as determined by the universal screener given in accordance with subsection (6) of this section;
- b. Did not master the Kentucky reading academic standards for first grade students based on assessments given in accordance with KRS 158.6453(8); (*districts' standards-aligned interim or formative assessments*); or
- c. Is not properly prepared to be successful in the second grade. These are described in the statute as “assessments given in accordance with KRS 158.6453(8)*

*italics added. KRS 158.6453(8) states that “A local school district may select and use commercial interim or formative assessments or develop and use its own formative assessments to provide data on how well its students are growing toward mastery of Kentucky academic standards”