

Inequities in Early Literacy Trajectories in Virginia¹

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KEY POINTS

- This study examined the relationship between children’s literacy skills at kindergarten entry and their reading proficiency in third grade across different racial and ethnic groups.
- Children who enter kindergarten with stronger literacy skills are more likely to reach proficiency standards on a high-stakes reading assessment in third grade.
- However, this pattern does not unfold equally across all children. There are considerable racial disparities in the likelihood of reaching third-grade reading proficiency even when comparing children who have similar levels of literacy skills at kindergarten entry.
- For example, a Black child who enters kindergarten with above average literacy skills has the same chance of meeting proficiency standards on the SOL exam as a White child who enters with literacy skills that are below average.
- These findings suggest that while children’s literacy skills at kindergarten entry strongly predict reading success in third grade, there are considerable inequities in children’s opportunities to learn in the early elementary grades.

STUDY MOTIVATION

Reading on grade level in third grade is a key indicator of children’s future academic outcomes. Children who are not reading on grade level by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school than children who are reading on grade level. Further, we know from prior research that Black, Hispanic, and low-income children are especially likely to be reading below grade level in third grade.²

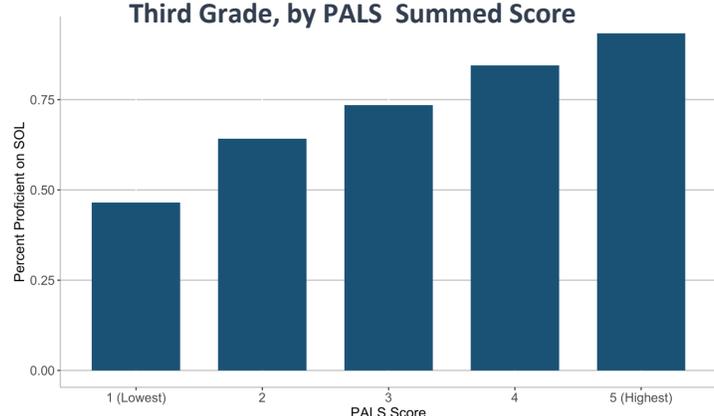
If stakeholders are to effectively ensure that more students are able to read on grade level by third grade, it is critical to understand the trajectory of children’s literacy skills from kindergarten to third grade and how this trajectory differs by children’s race and ethnicity.

Using the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screener (PALS), a statewide literacy assessment at kindergarten entry (N = 67,164 children across all but one school division in Virginia), this study analyzes the relationship between children’s literacy skills at kindergarten entry and their later reading outcomes on the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) reading assessment in third grade.

CHILDREN’S LITERACY SKILLS AT KINDERGARTEN ENTRY PREDICT THIRD-GRADE READING PROFICIENCY

First, we examined the overall relationship between children’s literacy skills at kindergarten entry and their score on the SOL reading assessment in third grade. In Figure 1, we divide children into five groups (quintiles) based on their PALS summed score in kindergarten. The figure indicates that children who enter kindergarten with stronger literacy skills are more likely to reach reading proficiency in third grade compared to children with lower skills at kindergarten entry.

Figure 1: Probability of Reaching Reading Proficiency in Third Grade, by PALS Summed Score



¹ From Herring, Bassok, McGinty, Miller, & Wyckoff (2021). Racial and Socioeconomic Disparities in the Relationship Between Children’s Early Literacy Skills and Third-Grade Outcomes: Lessons from a Kindergarten Readiness Assessment. (EdWorkingPaper: 21-429). Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/qay6-5224>.

² Annie E Casey Foundation (2010). Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters.

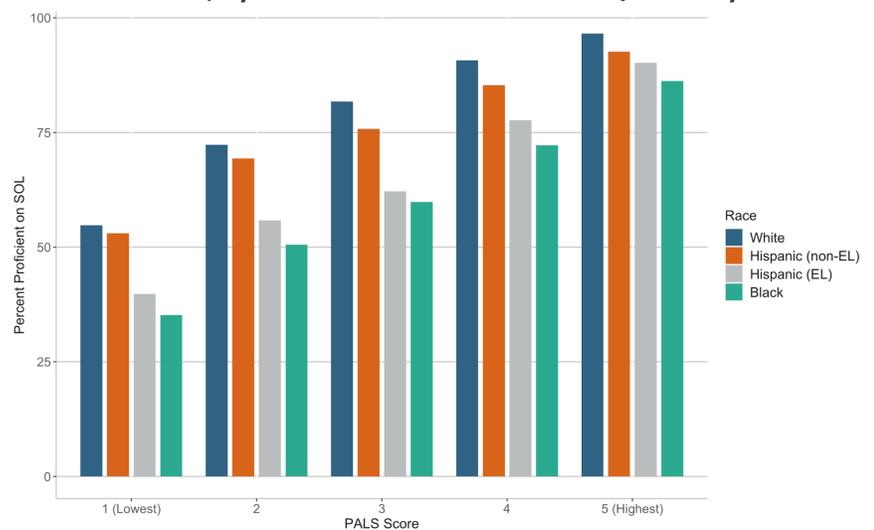
EQUAL STARTING POINT, EQUAL CHANCE OF SUCCESS?

Next, we looked at whether children who enter kindergarten with similar literacy skills have an equal chance of reaching reading proficiency in third grade. Given the persistent disparities in children's third-grade test scores along lines of race and ethnicity, it is important to understand how these disparities develop in earlier grades. In making these comparisons, we acknowledge that PALS measures only children's literacy skills and does not account for all of the strengths that they bring to the classroom.

When comparing children with similar literacy skills at kindergarten entry, we found considerable disparities in future reading outcomes along line of race and ethnicity. Figure 2 shows that regardless of whether a child comes to kindergarten with relatively high literacy skills or low literacy skills, Black and Hispanic-English Learner (EL) children are less likely to reach reading proficiency (as measured by the SOL) in third grade when compared to their White peers.

A Black child who enters kindergarten with above average literacy skills (4th quintile) has the same chance of meeting proficiency standards on the SOL exam as a White child who enters with below average literacy skills (2nd quintile).

Figure 2: Probability of Reaching Reading Proficiency in Third Grade, by PALS Summed Score and Race/Ethnicity



IMPLICATIONS

Our findings indicate that while children's literacy development at kindergarten entry is a strong predictor of reading success in third grade, there are considerable inequities in children's opportunities to learn in the early elementary grades along lines of race and ethnicity.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to identify the source of these educational inequities. It might be that White children are more likely to read proficiently in third grade than their peers because they attend better-resourced schools. It could also be the case that racial disparities would exist even if we compared children who attend the same schools. Research has pointed to a number of reasons why children from different racial and ethnic groups could have inequitable opportunities to learn even within the same school, such as biases in ability grouping and teacher expectations for students. Though our analysis here cannot determine why we observe these disparities, they are nonetheless important to informing evidence-based instructional practices for all young learners in Virginia.

The Phonological Awareness Literacy Screener (PALS) is the state-provided screening tool for the Virginia Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI). For more information on PALS, visit pals.virginia.edu.

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