

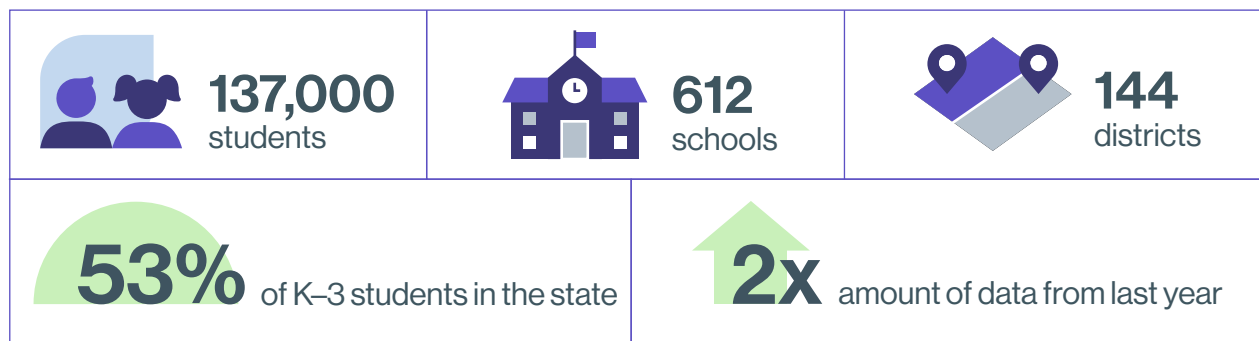
# Early Literacy Performance in Massachusetts

## Key Findings From 2023/24 School Year Data

Fall 2025

For 4 years, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has collected and analyzed early literacy screening assessment data from schools and districts that participated in targeted state grants. In 2023/24, the 1st year that screening was required for all kindergarten through grade 3 students statewide, data were collected for nearly half the state’s population of kindergarten through grade 3 students. Screening assessments, typically administered two to three times per year, help schools identify students who may be at risk of reading difficulties and guide early intervention. This brief provides key insights on patterns of early literacy performance and progress based on 2023/24 and earlier data.<sup>1</sup>

### 2023/24 Screening Assessment Data by the Numbers



**Note.** Not all schools and districts were required to report data.

<sup>1</sup> Prior reporting is available at the DESE [Early Reading Performance in Massachusetts site](#).

## Key Findings for School Year 2023/24

### Risk Identification Rates Are Consistent and Unequal

- About one third (33%) of students were identified as significantly below benchmark at least once during the school year; 19 percent of students were identified as such in all three time periods of the school year (fall/beginning of year [BOY], winter/middle of year [MOY], and spring/end of year [EOY]). Without targeted, intensive intervention, students performing significantly below benchmark are at risk of future difficulty in reading and comprehending what they read. These rates have been consistent across all 3 years of analysis.
- Students from low income backgrounds, English learners (ELs), students receiving special education services, and Black and Hispanic students were more often identified as at significant risk compared with students not in those groups.

### School Context and Racial Segregation Widen Disparities

- School- and district-level factors, including concentration of students from low income backgrounds and racial isolation, are associated with higher early literacy risk rates.

### Risk Status Tends to Persist Within and Across Years

- Seventy-five percent of students identified as significantly below benchmark at BOY were still significantly below benchmark at EOY. Most students identified as at significant risk at EOY remain at significant risk into later grades.
- Additionally, as shown in [prior analyses](#), more students from low income backgrounds, EL students, students receiving special education services, and students who did not identify as White or Asian were significantly below benchmark at EOY after being identified as such at BOY than were their peers who are not in those groups.

### Some Students Improve— and Timing Matters

- Students who improved their performance beyond the significant risk threshold typically maintained higher scores on screening assessments and the grade 3 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test. Also, students in earlier grades consistently showed a lower likelihood of remaining at significant risk from year to year compared with students in later grades. These findings also mirror past results.

## Screening Tools Yield Varying Results

- In any time period, about 3 percent to 4 percent of students took more than one screening assessment. Rates of agreement between screening assessments—that is, whether students would be considered at risk of reading difficulty on both assessments—varied from 47 percent to 85 percent depending on screening assessment combinations. Such differences underscore the need for schools and the state to carefully consider screener comparability and screening practices.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

Findings from 2023/24 and prior years show the need for early and effective interventions to disrupt trajectories of reading difficulty. Without them, students who are identified as at significant risk often remain at that level. The fact that risk identification rates have remained stable over the past few years suggests that current intervention practices are not yet fully addressing student needs—particularly for students from historically underserved groups and in schools serving these students. Continued efforts to efficiently screen and provide comprehensive instruction and supports to students must remain a priority.