



Frequently Asked Questions: Improving Literacy in Wisconsin

What is the debate?

25 years ago, Wisconsin ranked near the top nationally in reading. Today, those scores have fallen considerably, and minority students in Wisconsin now have some of the worst scores in the nation. We are failing a whole generation and we need to reverse course.

Why have reading scores fallen?

In the last 20 years, Wisconsin shifted to a “balanced literacy” approach where phonics is taught alongside “three-cueing.” The result has been clear: this approach has not worked and Wisconsin’s children are not learning how to read.

Why is reading so important?

Reading is key to success in almost all subjects. This becomes apparent when you look at how Mississippi’s math scores saw major gains along with their success in literacy.

How does Wisconsin rank?

[White students](#) in Wisconsin rank 21st nationally, having dropped 18 spots since the 1990s. White and [middle-class kids](#) alike now read half a school year behind Mississippi’s. It’s even worse for [Hispanic and Black children](#), who read a year and two years behind Mississippi’s, respectively.

What is three-cueing?

The three-cueing approach teaches students to use context, grammar structure, and visual cues to determine what a word means instead of using the word itself.

What is the best teaching approach for reading?

Phonics. Phonics (sounding out letters) is scientifically proven to be the most effective way to teach young minds how to read. In 2013, Mississippi switched to phonics-based instruction. Between 2013 and 2022, [Mississippi students jumped](#) an entire grade level in reading (and math), whereas Wisconsin stayed flat.

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What can we do to get Wisconsin’s children back on track?

We need reform, and there are several ways to do that. For an outline of all the policy levers available to lawmakers, please read IRG’s latest release, *Ranking our Options: Nine Ways to Improve Literacy in Wisconsin*.

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