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Closing Achievement Gaps: Report to the Iowa Legislature

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

The “achievement gap” in education refers to the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. Iowa faces significant gaps in achievement for students who face economic hardship, students with an individualized education program, students whose first language is not English, and black and Hispanic students. This gap can be seen in assessment scores, course selection, graduation rates, and college-completion rates. Early identification and intervention have the greatest likelihood of closing these gaps and putting students on the path toward success.

While achievement gaps can be found in many subjects, this report focuses primarily on reading. Much of a student’s success in school and in life depends on the ability to read. Research has identified reading as a gateway skill; students must be proficient readers in order to learn and progress in school. Poor reading skills have been linked to lower graduation rates, higher juvenile and adult crime, and higher likelihood of unemployment.

Consider that:

- Over 60 percent of inmates in the U.S prison system have reading skills at or below the fourth-grade level.
- Eighty-five percent of U.S juveniles in prison are functionally illiterate.
- Forty-three percent of adults with extremely low reading skills live at or below the poverty line (Marshall, 2014; Write Express Corp, 2014).

The predictability of reading for life success is strong. The proportion of middle school students who are far behind in reading is a robust predictor of problems with the law and the potential for incarceration later in life (Boulton, 2013).

This report examines the latest data by which we gauge the achievement gap and highlights the work under way to implement an evidence-based solution with the goal of addressing problem areas early on and increasing the likelihood of success for students.

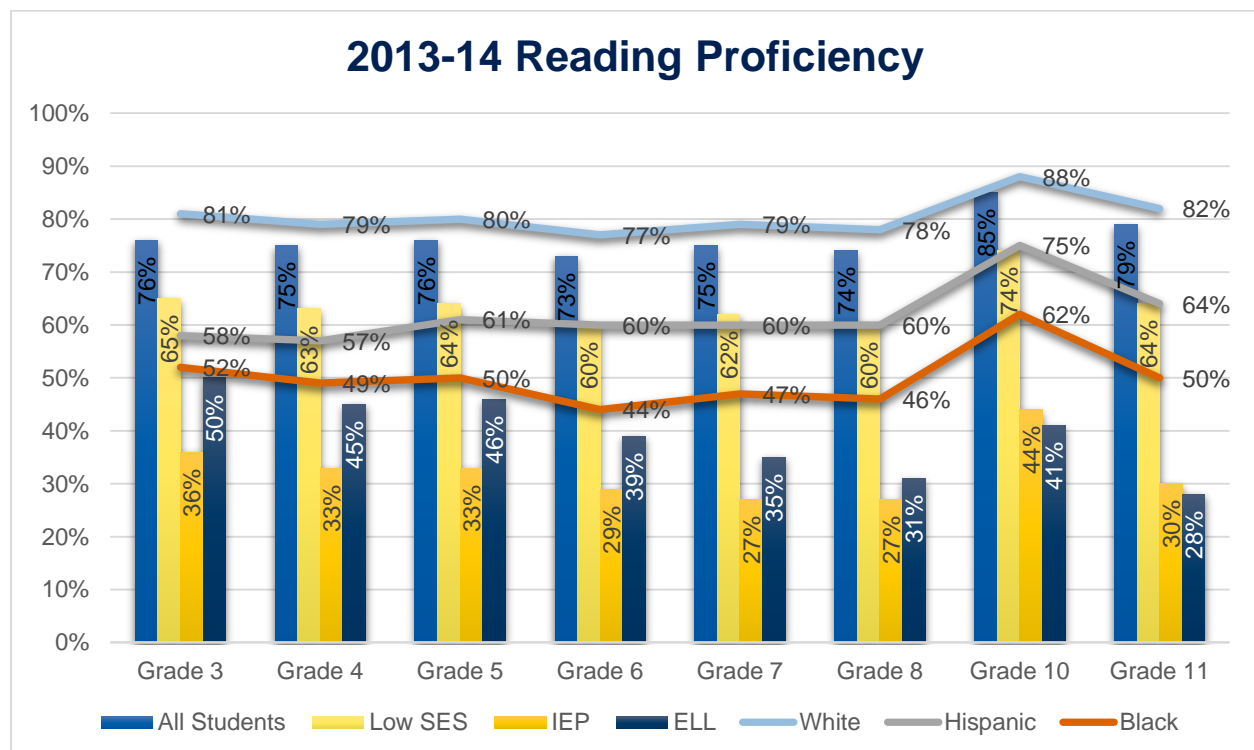
Highlighted in this report is the work under way to implement a comprehensive early literacy initiative. There’s an unprecedented level of collaboration between the Iowa Reading Research Center, the Iowa Department of Education, area education agencies, and Iowa school districts to work together as a coordinated system to improve early literacy.

STATUS OF ACHIEVEMENT GAPS IN IOWA

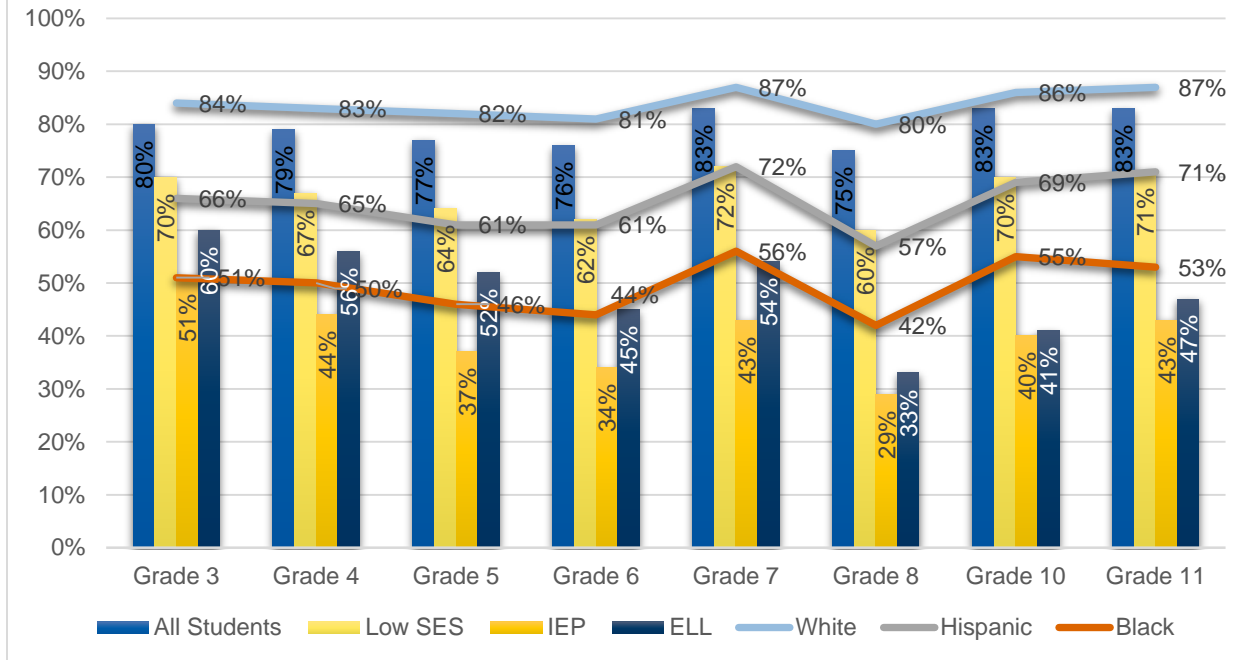
Iowa educators have a vision of educational equity and excellence for every student in Iowa. It is through this vision that Iowa will work to ensure a bright future for young people and the state. However, Iowa faces a growing achievement gap that threatens our economic competitiveness and our capacity to innovate. It is clear when examining proficiency levels among student subgroups there are significant performance differences, and the gap fluctuates between grade and content areas. The persistent achievement gaps for students from diverse backgrounds, students with an individualized education program (IEP), English language learners (ELL), and low socio-economic status (SES) income students remain a roadblock.

While students from diverse backgrounds make up about 21 percent of our state and students who have economic hardship about 40 percent, these student populations have increased significantly over the past 15 years, and our achievement gaps have continued to persist. If the ability to meet the needs of these students remains stagnant or declines as the state becomes more diverse, we will limit the opportunity of all students.

Significant achievement gaps exist in both reading and mathematics across all grade levels. In grade 3, the gap in reading proficiency between all students and students who are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch is 11 percent. However, in grade 11 the gap increases to 15 percent. Similar trends can be seen between these same grade levels in mathematics, where the gap is 10 percent in grade 3 and 12 percent in grade 11.



2013-14 Mathematics Proficiency



Sizeable gaps can also be found between the ELL subgroup and students with an IEP across grades. In grade 3 reading, the gap is 26 percent for ELL students and 40 percent for students with and IEP. Further, the gaps are sustainably larger in grade 11 between all students and ELL and students with an IEP, with a 49 percent gap for students with an IEP and 51 percent for ELL students. Similar trends in the achievement gap can also be found in mathematics.

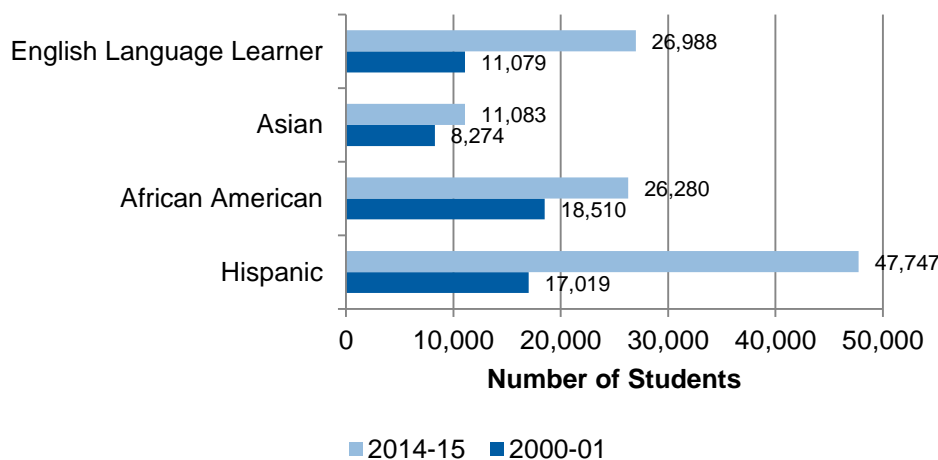
DIVERSITY TREND CONTINUES AND POVERTY RATES DECLINE

Iowa continues to see increases in the number of students who come from diverse backgrounds and whose first language is not English. In October 2014, 21.1 percent of Iowa students were racial or ethnic minorities. This compares with approximately 10 percent of Iowa students who were minorities in 2000. Overall, this is a 108 percent increase in minority students over this 14-year period. This change in the student population suggests that many of Iowa's school districts have seen significant changes in the types of students they educate, as well as the families they engage.

The percent increase in the number of students since 2000:

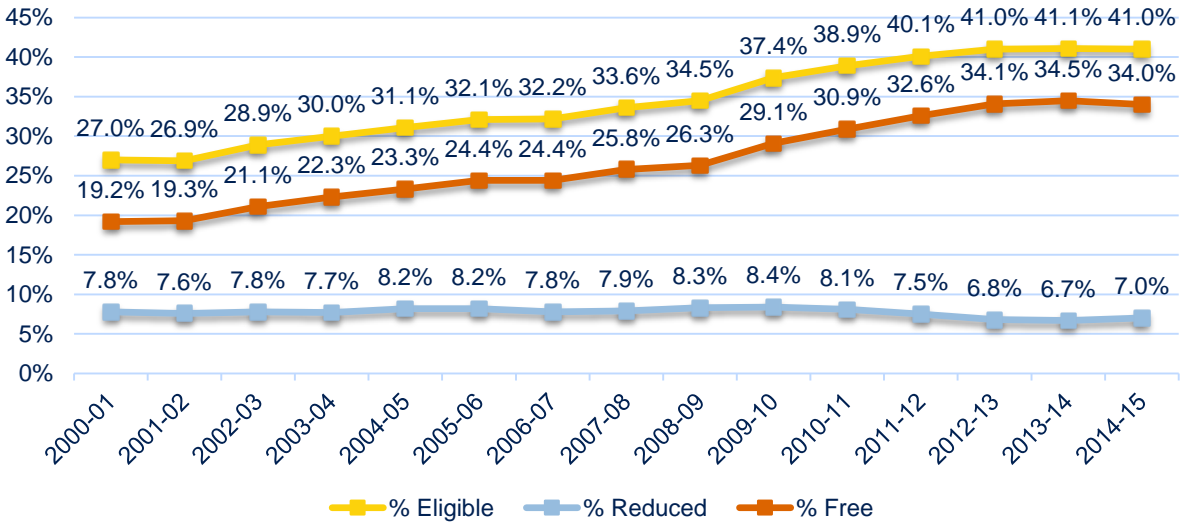
- 188% - Hispanic
- 42% - African American
- 34% - Asian
- 144% - English Language Learner

Enrollment Trends



Free or reduced-priced lunch eligibility is the proximate measure for economic diversity in Iowa's schools. For the first time since Iowa began collecting student eligibility data, there was a slight decline in the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch. In the 2014-15 school year, 41 percent of students in Iowa schools were eligible. This was a slight decrease of 0.1 percentage point from the 2013-14 school year. When looking to the changes in the 2014-15 school year, there was a slight increase in the percent of students eligible for reduced-price lunch and a slight decline in the percent of students eligible for free lunch. Long-term trends show a significant increase in the percentage of low-income students. In the 2000-01 school year, 27 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch. Over the 15-year period from 2000-01 to 2014-15, there is a 14 percentage-point increase, which is close to one percentage-point gain per year in this population.

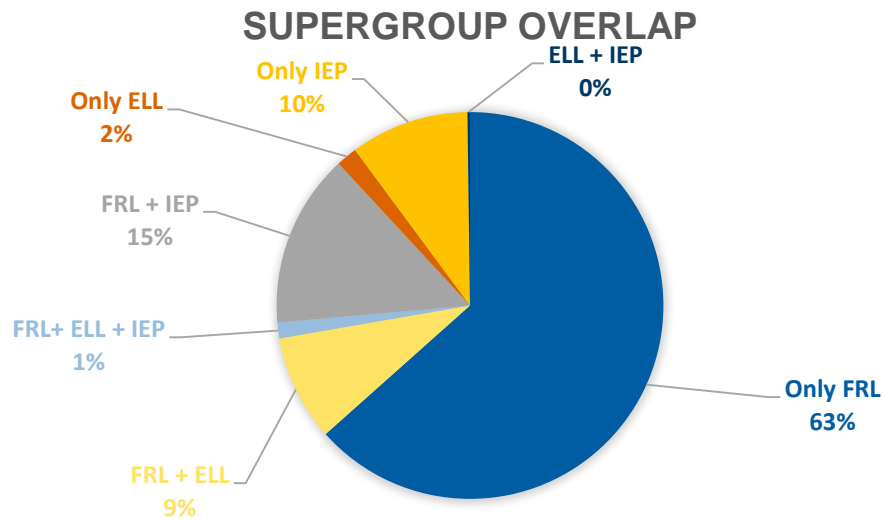
Percent of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch 2000-01 to 2014-15



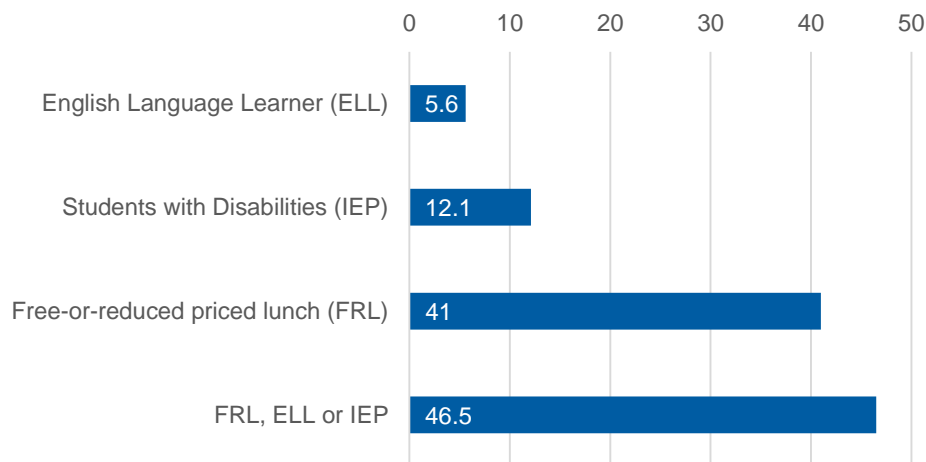
It is important to note the decrease in free lunch eligibility could in part be due to a change in the collection of these data by school districts. In the 2014-15 school year, some districts were eligible for the first time to participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) for the National School Lunch Program. CEP allows direct certification of free meal benefits and no longer requires a collection of free and reduced-price meal applications. This required schools to change how the data were collected for student socioeconomic status. This change could be a contributor to the decrease in the free eligibility reported; more analysis needs to be done to understand this change.

With the overall increase in diversity across Iowa schools, it is important to examine the overlap between groups of students. An interesting finding emerges in looking at the intersection between students eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch, students who are ELL, and students with an IEP. In 2014-15, approximately 40 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch; 12 percent were students with an IEP and 5.6 percent were ELL. However, when you combine each indicator, you see that the size of the group only increases slightly in the proportion of the students represented.

The combined group was 46.5 percent of K-12 enrollment, which is only slightly higher than the group of students eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch. This group can be called a “supergroup” for analysis purposes. The supergroup is made up of students eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch or ELL students or students with an IEP. This suggests that there is significant overlap between groups, and the likelihood of students having multiple challenges is higher. While poverty makes up the largest percentage of this group at 63 percent, over one-third has multiple challenges. Further, it underscores the need to target resources and supports to ensure an equitable education.



Percent of Students in Subgroups



Countless studies document the role that poverty plays in the development of reading skills. Factors such as the quality of student learning behaviors, home environment, past experiences with education, mobility, attendance, and teacher attitudes are among the many influences on student achievement. Students whose parents are highly educated tend to have high vocabulary development. However, students from low-income backgrounds tend to have very little vocabulary development. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2013) indicate that poverty negatively impacts learning, as students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch performed significantly lower on the tests than their more affluent counterparts in Iowa and in the nation. In order to improve skills in reading, it is necessary to support vulnerable learners. Teachers cannot change their students' lives at home, but they can make a difference at school.

IMPROVING PERFORMANCE AND CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

For decades, the education community has sought to close the achievement gaps in Iowa and nationwide, but we have struggled to maintain focus and commitment. One lesson learned over time is that the issues of inequity in achievement and access cannot be addressed by simply doing the same things harder (Darling-Hammond, 2010). It is critical to identify effective strategies to address the achievement gap in Iowa. The *Overcoming the Achievement Divide: Key Challenges and Solutions for Iowa Schools* report from October 2012 documented some key concepts related to good practices.

FOCUSING THE EFFORTS OF THE IOWA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Three areas remain consistent and the focus of meaningful work:

Teacher Leadership

Iowa is working to secure high-quality teachers who are trained and retained to deliver high-quality instruction to all students and who possess the skills to tailor instruction to meet the needs of students of widely varying needs.

One Unshakable Vision: World-Class Schools for Iowa, a 2011 report from the Governor's office, outlined several key recommendations to increase teacher quality in Iowa schools, including strategies to attract and support talented educators, improve educator recruiting and hiring practices, and create educator leadership roles. In 2013, the Legislature adopted Iowa's Teacher Leadership and Compensation System, which better utilizes the expertise of many of Iowa's top teachers to improve instruction and raise student achievement. The system provides effective teachers with leadership opportunities and attracts promising new teachers with more competitive starting salaries and more support. It also fosters greater collaboration for all teachers to learn from one another.

Academic Standards

Iowa's academic standards, known as the Iowa Core, represent expectations for what students should know and be able to do from kindergarten through grade 12 in literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and 21st century skills. Over the past several years, Iowa's education system has worked to put the standards into practice. Iowa schools are required to have demonstrated full implementation of the standards by the end of the 2014-15 school year. Within the past year, the Iowa Department of Education launched the IowaCore.gov website as a resource for educators, parents, and other stakeholders to better understand, access, and deliver our state standards. The Iowa Department of Education also has launched a review of the standards, starting with science, in response to Governor Branstad's Executive Order 83. The goal of the review is to improve Iowa's academic standards and make sure they are the right fit for the state.

Early Literacy/Multi-Tiered System of Supports

The ability to read fluently is foundational to success in school and beyond, and research shows that early intervention is the key to ensuring every child reaches proficiency in reading. In 2012, the Governor's office proposed, and Iowa legislators adopted, an early literacy initiative to ensure students reach reading proficiency by the end of third grade.

This work includes:

- An early warning data system to identify struggling young readers, provide customized interventions, and monitor student progress. The education system has worked to scale up this effort in schools statewide through a practice called Multi-Tiered System of Supports, or MTSS. MTSS is a flexible and encompassing system of early screening, targeted interventions, progress monitoring, and ongoing data-based decision-making to ensure progress for all students.
- An Iowa Reading Research Center to lead the work needed to support the early literacy initiative. The center is charged with specific tasks that include the development of reading assessments, a statewide data system, evidence-based reading interventions and strategies, an intensive summer literacy program, professional development, and school-community partnerships.

Implementation relies heavily on collaboration between the Iowa Department of Education, area education agencies, and schools, as well as the Iowa Reading Research Center to deliver uniform professional development, as well as evidence-based practices in instruction and assessment. To that end, the state established Collaborating for Iowa's Kids (C4K), an infrastructure through which Iowa's education system implements statewide work. One of C4K's priorities is establishing the early warning system in reading.

Components of the early warning system and MTSS include:

- Universal screening: Screening identifies students who may be at-risk for not reading proficiently and provides teachers with this information real-time so that they may adjust instruction to meet the students' needs.
- Evidence-based interventions: All students receive evidence-based, rigorous instruction in the core curriculum, and students who need more support receive small-group or individual instruction targeted to their specific needs.
- Progress monitoring: Students are monitored to ensure they are progressing appropriately. When they are not progressing, they receive additional learning opportunities.
- Data-based decision-making: The system relies heavily on the ability of educators to make informed decisions based on data – specifically, the universal screening and progress monitoring data. The Iowa TIER data system allows easy access to student data, as well as school system implementation information.

The state's supported universal screening and progress monitoring assessments include:

- Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs) universal screening for 4-year-old preschool children.
- Formative Assessment System for Teachers (FAST) for children in kindergarten through grade 6.

During the summer of 2013, 10 percent of Iowa’s schools were trained to implement IGDIs and FAST, as well as how to make system-wide instructional changes based on results. This initial set of schools made up the first phase of implementation, and a scaled approach was planned to expand usage until the system was available to all elementary schools in Iowa. Because the first phase was so successful, leaders of many districts and schools wanted to participate.

As a way to provide support to districts in implementation of the Early Literacy Progression legislation, in the summer of 2014, most school districts in the state (more than 90 percent) were trained to use Iowa TIER and the assessments. At least one representative of each district attended training focused on the state-approved universal screening and progress monitoring assessments. During the summer start-up trainings, 1,972 school staff members were trained on the software interface and assessment tools. In addition, approximately 12,500 school personnel have been set up and have access to the Iowa TIER application. As part of initial implementation, the following numbers were completed during the fall 2014 screening window:

Early Warning System	
Total public districts	305
Total nonpublic schools	43
Total school buildings (public and nonpublic)	634
Total public school students screened	155,003
Total nonpublic school students screened	6,294
Total PK-6 students screened	161,297
Total K-3 students screened	117,580

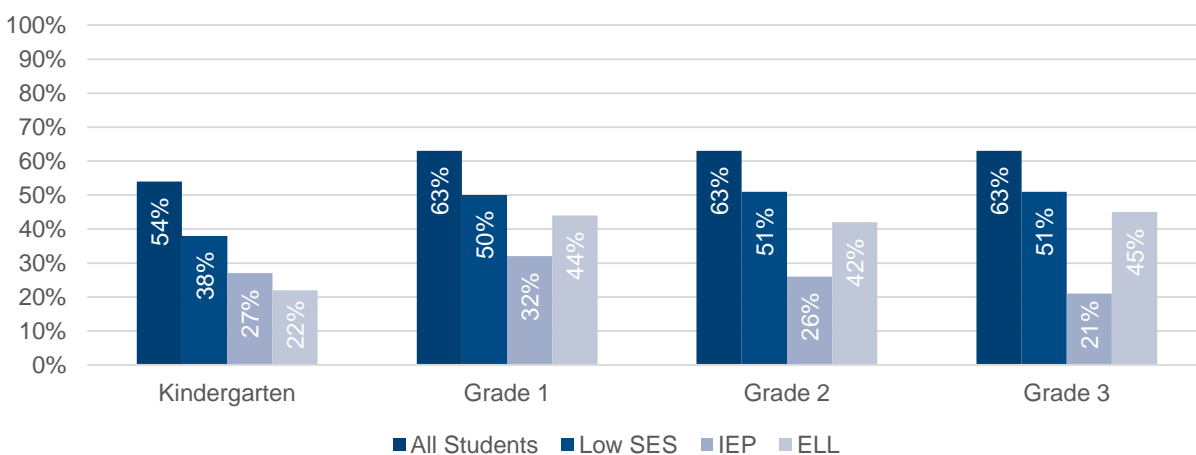
Statewide participation from the fall 2014 assessment window are impressive.

Data from these screenings serve as basis for additional building and district-based problem-solving to identify necessary instructional practices and procedures to best meet student needs.

FALL SCREENING RESULTS

The results of the fall screening window provide information about the percentage of students who are on track for early literacy. The statewide results show significant differences between subgroups and their peers in meeting benchmarks for reading proficiency. These results suggest the need for a substantial statewide focus on universal instruction for all students, as well as interventions for those identified in the targeted and intensive tiers. It is important to highlight that this is the first time Iowa has had a set of statewide data that provide a comprehensive view of early literacy trends for grades K-3 in Iowa. These data will be used to determine the next steps in providing supports to students across subgroups in raising reading proficiency by third grade.

2013-14 Early Literacy Results % Students Meeting Benchmark Fast earlyReading and CBM-Reading



NEXT STEPS

Given the rapid expansion of the early warning system statewide, it is important to ensure the rollout is sustainable. Sustainability involves two items: assurance that the model for scalability is sound, and evaluating the process and outcomes of the work. The Iowa Department of Education has established a team responsible for evaluating the process to bring the early warning system to scale in the state and the outcomes achieved for students. In the coming years, the early warning system will build upon the foundation and framework that was constructed during the first two years. The initial focus on reading in the early grades was purposeful because as a state, we can bring the practice to scale effectively first, and then bring in additional academic areas and grades.

CONCLUSION

The achievement gap between groups of Iowa students continues to be a problem that lacks a simple solution.

Iowa's districts and schools continue to see more students from diverse backgrounds than ever before. Rural and urban schools are educating a significant number of students who have special needs, come from low-income backgrounds, and who do not speak English as their native language. Iowa's education system has come together around key reform areas to implement initiatives to assist in meeting these challenges.

The Iowa Department of Education, along with area education agencies and school district partners, have focused efforts in several key areas:

- Educator quality – Work is underway to implement the Teacher Leadership and Compensation System, which provides leadership opportunities and higher pay, attracts promising new teachers with minimum starting salaries and more support, and fosters greater collaboration for all teachers to learn from each other.
- Academic standards – Districts and schools have been working over the past several years to implement a set of high-quality expectations for what students should know and be able to do in literacy, mathematics, social studies, science, and 21st century skills.
- Early Literacy/MTSS – In just over two years, the Iowa Department of Education has built, piloted, and brought to scale a system that supports teachers in differentiating instruction to maintain progress for each learner. While the initial focus has been on K-6 literacy, this system will expand to include more academic areas and grade levels.

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