

How Early Learning Can Address the Third Grade Reading Crisis and How AWE Helps

Executive Summary

The 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results have sounded a nationwide alarm: **over 65% of 4th graders are not proficient in reading or math**. Despite historic federal investments in education recovery, the data shows a troubling decline in foundational literacy. This white paper explores how **public libraries—and the professionals who power them—can lead the turnaround** using scalable and developmentally appropriate tools like those offered by AWE Learning.

The Third-Grade Reading Crisis

- **Why it matters:** By third grade, children transition from learning how to read to using reading as the tool for all future learning. Falling behind at this stage makes catching up exponentially harder.
- **The scope:** Only about 31% of U.S. fourth graders are proficient readers. The rates are even lower for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **The risk:** Students who are not proficient by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.



Why Early Learning is the Solution

Research consistently shows that early literacy development is one of the strongest predictors of long-term academic achievement. Early learning matters because:

- **Brain development peaks early:** 90% of brain growth happens before age 5, making early exposure to language and literacy skills critical.
- **Early intervention is more effective:** Gaps in phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension widen with each grade level. The earlier the intervention, the easier it is to close them.
- **Confidence builds early:** Children who see themselves as “readers” in the early years approach school with confidence and curiosity.
- **Family and community engagement starts at a young age:** Early learning environments encourage parents and caregivers to be part of the process, reinforcing skills at home.

How AWE Learning Supports Early Learning

AWE Learning’s solutions are designed specifically to address early literacy during the most critical years (ages 2–8).

- **Play-based literacy building:** Games, activities, and stories that develop phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency.
- **Safe, focused environment:** Standalone workstations keep children engaged in learning without online distractions.
- **Bilingual and accessible:** Options in English, Spanish, and French support multilingual learners and expand equity of access.
- **STREAM-aligned content:** Reading is integrated with science, technology, arts, and math to show children how literacy connects to every subject.
- **Engagement and motivation:** Interactive, multimedia content sparks curiosity and joy motivating children to practice literacy skills consistently.

Early Learning in Action: AWE Implementation Models

Preschool & Kindergarten Classrooms: AWE stations provide literacy centers that introduce phonics and vocabulary in playful ways.

- **Public Libraries:** Community hubs where children can access early learning opportunities beyond the school day.
- **Home & After-School Programs:** AWE Learning helps families and caregivers reinforce literacy at home, bridging gaps in access.
- **Summer Learning:** Keeps children engaged during breaks, reducing the “summer slide” that often widens reading gaps.

Recommendations for Success

Start early: Implement AWE Learning programs in Pre-K through Grade 3 classrooms and community spaces.

- **Pair with structured literacy:** Use AWE to complement teacher-led phonics and evidence-based instruction.
- **Engaged families:** Provide guidance for parents on using AWE as a tool for early learning at home.
- **Track outcomes:** Use AWE's reporting features alongside assessments to monitor growth in early literacy skills.

Conclusion

The third grade reading crisis threatens the future of millions of children, but it doesn't have to. Early learning is the answer. By investing in literacy before third grade, schools, libraries, and communities can change outcomes for students at risk of falling behind. AWE Learning is a proven partner in this mission. The Company's Early Literacy Stations and digital resources give children the tools to build strong reading foundations early, setting them on a trajectory for lifelong learning and success.

For additional information on this white paper, or AWE Learning's Early Literacy Stations, contact us at info@AWElearning.com.