WHITE PAPER

Students Are Reading Less and Losing Stamina: Why Sustained Reading Matters More Than Ever

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Decades of research have proven conclusively that reading volume matters. Students who read more across genres, topics, and settings develop stronger comprehension, vocabulary, and background knowledge through repeated exposure to language, ideas, and complex texts (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Mol & Bus, 2011; Stanovich, 1986; Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

> “Reading volume is critical because it provides opportunities for vocabulary growth, knowledge acquisition, and the development of fluid word recognition.
>
> *—Anne E. Cunningham & Keith E. Stanovich*[1]

Despite strong evidence demonstrating the positive effects of reading volume, students across the country are reading less, for shorter stretches, and completing fewer full books. This shift is not confined to a single grade band, demographic group, or region. It is widespread, persistent, and increasingly visible in national and local reading data. Students are encountering fewer sustained reading opportunities—even as academic expectations grow more demanding.

Sustained reading depends on consistent access to abundant, relevant, grade-level texts and supportive environments that extend beyond the school day. By expanding access to high-quality texts and aligning instructional supports, schools can accelerate reading engagement, stamina, and deep comprehension.

[1] Cunningham, A. E., & Stanovich, K. E. (1998). *What reading does for the mind.* American Educator, 22(1–2), 8–15. www.aft.org/ae/spring1998/cunningham_stanovich

The Problem

Recent media coverage of college students struggling to complete books has brought attention to the issue of declining reading stamina. However, these challenges do not emerge suddenly in higher education; rather, they reflect patterns that take shape much earlier. When students are not routinely given the opportunity or support to engage with sustained and connected texts throughout elementary, middle, and high school, the gap between reading expectations and reading capacity widens over time (Coleman, 2024; Horowitz, 2024). At the point when reading becomes an unavoidable necessity, many students have had limited opportunities to build the endurance and confidence required to meet expectations in postsecondary settings, including higher education and the workforce.

> “Many students no longer arrive at college—even at highly selective, elite colleges—prepared to read books.
>
> *—Rose Horowitz*[2]

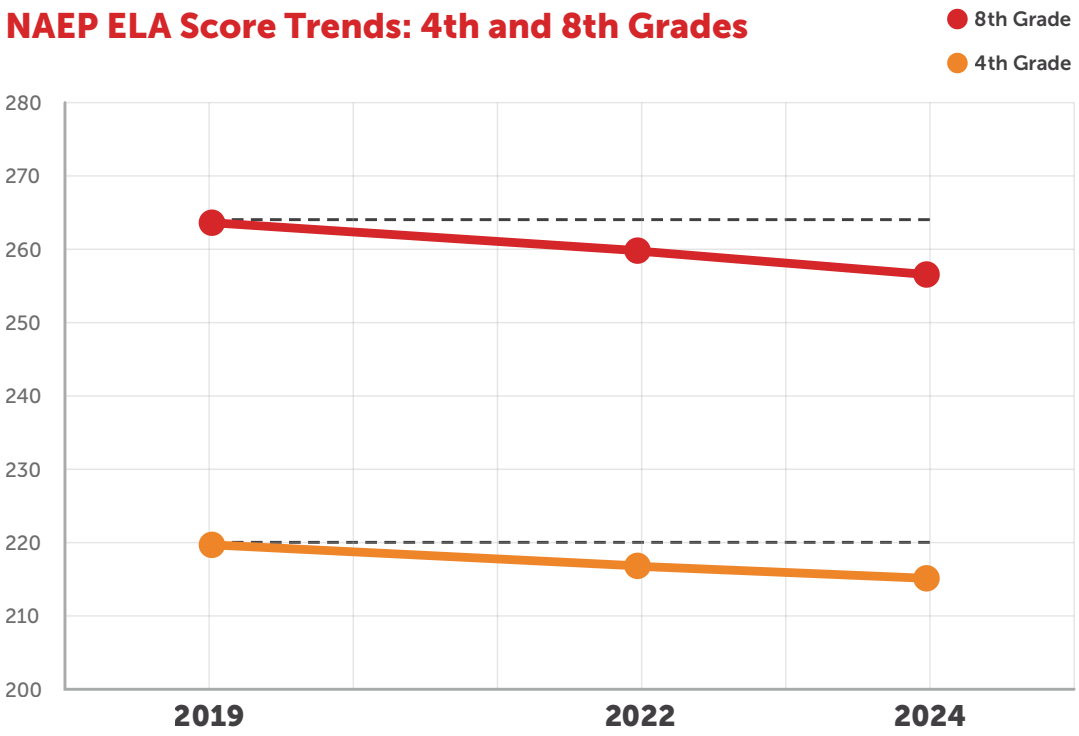
[2] Horowitz, R. The Atlantic. (2024). The elite college students who can’t read books. The Atlantic. www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/11/the-elite-college-students-who-cant-read-books/679945/

What the Research Shows

National assessments show that reading achievement has stagnated or declined over time (NAEP, 2024; NAEP Long-Term Trend). In addition, international data show that U.S. students' reading performance and engagement lag behind peer performance in other countries, particularly as texts become more complex and sustained (OECD, 2018; OECD, 2022).

Large-scale surveys show a steady decline in reading for pleasure and independent reading across all age groups, but especially among adolescents (NEA/U.S. Census, 2024). The downward trend is systemic and disproportionately affects students who rely most on schools for access to books, time to read, and coherent literacy experiences.

NAEP ELA Score Trends: 4th and 8th Grades

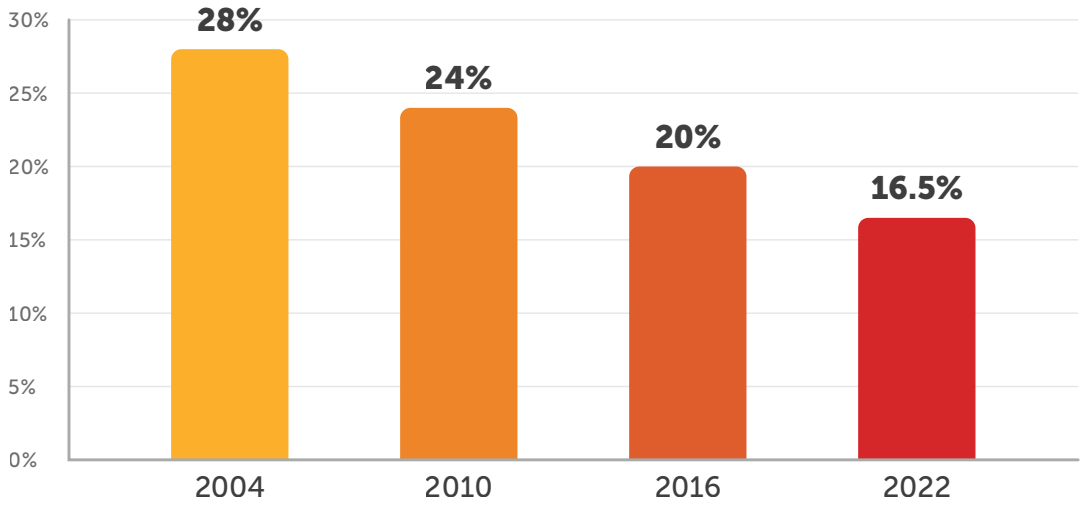


When students read less by choice, they also read less by volume, reducing opportunities to develop fluency and stamina and to accumulate prior knowledge and vocabulary that make comprehension possible:

- **Fluency**—defined as accuracy, automaticity, and prosody—supports comprehension by freeing cognitive resources for meaning-making (Rasinski, 2004; Rasinski et al., 2011).
- Repeated, meaningful encounters with connected text help students build **stamina**.
- Research shows comprehension depends heavily on **prior knowledge and vocabulary,** which accumulate primarily through reading extended texts rather than isolated passages or reading drills (Wexler, 2019; 2025).

Fragmented reading experiences offer students fewer opportunities to build what makes future reading easier. Without regular access to rich, engaging books, students miss the repeated exposure to language and ideas that helps reading feel more natural and sustainable over time—leaving longer texts feeling exhausting and accelerating avoidance and declining reading volume.

Percent of Americans who read for pleasure each day[3]



Source: University College London

[3] Bone, J. (2025, August 20). *Proportion of Americans reading for pleasure fell by 40% over 20 years.* UCL News. www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2025/aug/proportion-americans-reading-pleasure-fell-40-over-20-years

Why This Matters

Reading stamina is not a peripheral or optional skill—it is a foundational condition for learning, opportunity, and long-term success. Without the ability to sustain attention across extended texts, students are limited not only in what they can read, but in what they can learn. Reading stamina underpins:

- **Comprehension and knowledge building** by enabling students to follow complex ideas, arguments, and narratives over time
- **Academic success across subjects,** as texts grow longer and more demanding in English language arts, science, social studies, and technical disciplines
- **Postsecondary and workforce readiness,** where independent reading, analysis, and synthesis of extended texts are baseline expectations (OECD, 2024)

Postsecondary education and today's workforce increasingly demand sustained reading as a gateway skill. College coursework, technical training programs, and many careers require individuals to interpret dense texts, evaluate evidence, and synthesize ideas independently. National and international data link literacy proficiency to economic participation, civic engagement, and adaptability in a changing labor market (OECD, 2024). When students leave high school without strong reading stamina, they are less prepared for these demands—even when they have met graduation requirements.

For this reason, declining reading stamina, as evidenced by the decrease in reading full books, is not simply a literacy concern—it is an access issue. Students who have fewer opportunities to build reading stamina in K–12 are systematically shut out of advanced coursework, postsecondary pathways, and career mobility. Addressing reading stamina is therefore not about adding another initiative; it is about ensuring all students have equitable access to the knowledge, pathways, and futures that sustained reading makes possible.

> Repeated reading provides students with the practice they need to develop fluency and a desire to read.
>
> *—Tim Rasinski*[4]

The Opportunity

This moment presents a clear opportunity for collective action. Research points to the need for a coherent, system-wide literacy vision that treats sustained reading of full books as essential, not supplemental. That means aligning expectations across classrooms, grades, and subjects so students regularly experience meaningful, extended reading.

A culture of reading depends on abundant, relevant, grade-level texts—in classrooms, libraries, homes, and communities. Literacy cannot live only in classrooms or only during the school year. It must travel with students, supported by families and trusted partners who believe that every student deserves the same opportunity to grow as a reader.

Instructional support must be grounded in evidence-based practices that include fluency development, knowledge-building, and engage students with both stories and informational texts. As Tim Rasinski notes, when students read more—and read well—they become more willing, capable, and confident readers.

[4] Rasinski, T. V. (2010). *The fluent reader: Oral reading strategies for building word recognition, fluency, and comprehension* (2nd ed.). Scholastic.

In Conclusion

Across the country, students are reading fewer full-length books and spending less time engaged in sustained reading, making it harder to build the stamina and confidence required for deep comprehension.

Students need consistent access to engaging, relevant, grade-level texts along with the time and support required to read them.

This requires offering students a rich balance of text types—including books, informational texts, and high-quality short-form content—while protecting time and instructional practices that prioritize reading volume and sustained engagement.

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