

*The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with Dollar General Literacy Foundation, is proud to present this issue brief examining the vital role afterschool programs play to build students' literacy skills. This issue brief will explore the additional support needed to help students with their reading, writing and critical thinking skills, as well as delve into the variety of ways in which afterschool programs are successfully developing students' literacy skills.*

Literacy is fundamental to one's learning, growing and comprehension of the world. The ability to read, write and think critically is essential in all facets of our lives—from academics to career to civic responsibility to social engagement. Whether it is reading about current events in newspapers or online, writing a cover letter to a potential employer, or reviewing the nutritional content of food when grocery shopping, one's literacy skills come into play. Yet, when looking at students' test scores in reading as an indicator of U.S. students' aptitude in literacy, more than 6 in 10 students at the elementary, middle and high school level are less than proficient in reading.<sup>i</sup> With more than 10 million students in an afterschool program—more than 2 million of whom are in middle school<sup>ii</sup>—afterschool programs hold infinite potential to provide students with the additional supports needed at a time when it is clear that more needs to be done to ensure that students are equipped with the literacy skills they will need when leaving school and entering the next stage of their lives.

### The State of Literacy in the U.S. at a Standstill

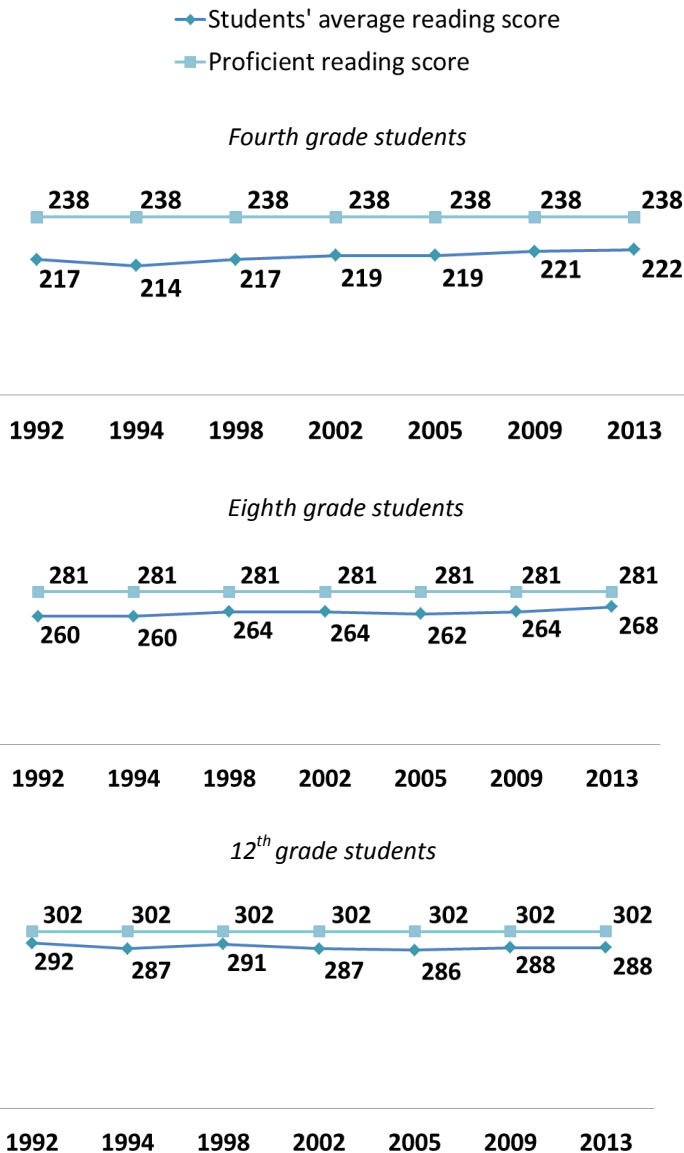
Over the past 20 years, there has not been a drastic change in students' average reading scores from the first National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) conducted in 1992 to present day.<sup>iii</sup> Although the scores for fourth and eighth graders have slightly increased, the average reading score has remained below "Proficient"<sup>1</sup> for fourth, eighth and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Additionally, the majority of our nation's students are performing below the "Proficient" level in reading. In 2013, 62 percent of high school students, 64 percent of eighth graders and 65 percent of fourth graders are less than "Proficient" in reading.<sup>iv</sup> Based on assessments of student's scores on the NAEP, a measure of

students' readiness to enter college was included in the 2013 Nation's Report Card, indicating that fewer than 4 in 10 12<sup>th</sup> graders (38 percent) were academically prepared in reading to enter college.<sup>v</sup>

While the U.S. 2012 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) reading score was slightly above the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average of 496, U.S. student scores in reading literacy have also not significantly changed since PISA was first conducted in 2000.<sup>vi</sup> In 2000, the average reading literacy score for 15-year-old students was 504 and in 2012, it was 498.

<sup>1</sup> According to the National Assessment of Education Progress, a "Proficient" score in reading is a score of at least 320 and "represents solid academic performance."

## U.S. students' average reading score on the National Assessment of Education Progress



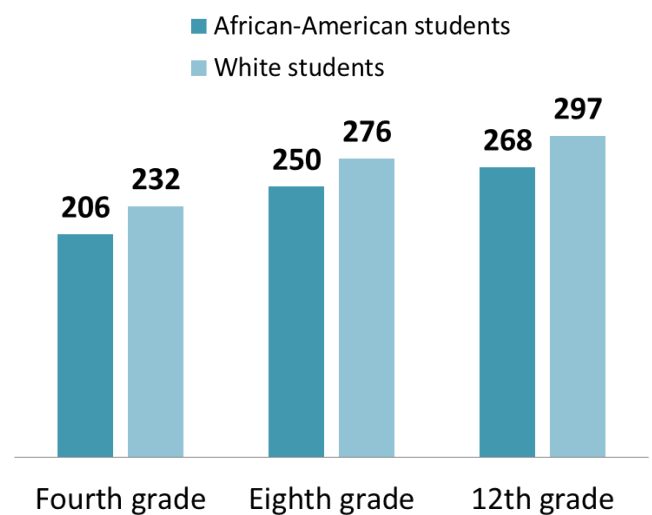
### Gaps in achievement

When examining student data by various demographic groups, gaps in achievement are highlighted—specifically looking at race and ethnicity, income level and English language learners. The gaps in achievement can be seen across grade levels, from fourth grade—the earliest grade level the NAEP is administered—through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. For instance, in 2013 there was a 26 point difference in reading scores between fourth grade African-American and white students (206 versus 232), a 26 point difference

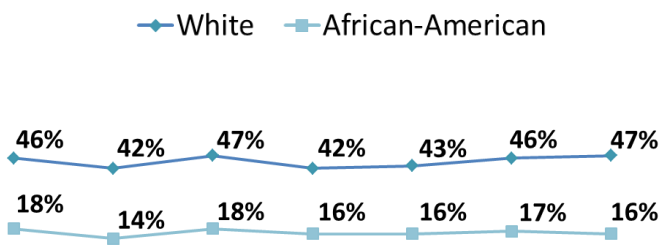
between eighth grade African-American and white students (250 versus 276) and a 29 point difference between 12<sup>th</sup> grade African-American students and white students (268 versus 297).<sup>vii</sup> When comparing 12<sup>th</sup> grade English language learners with non-English language learners, there was more than a 50 point difference in reading scores (237 versus 290).

Comparing low-income students with their higher-income counterparts, in 2013 there was a 29 point difference between fourth grade low-income students and their higher-income counterparts (207 versus 236) and a 24 point difference between eighth graders who are eligible for the free or reduced price lunch program and those who are not (254 versus 278).<sup>viii</sup> The 2012 PISA results looked at students' scores through the lens of a mix of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) indicators, and they found that the higher students placed on the ESCS index, the higher their average score in reading.<sup>ix</sup> The average score of students who fell within the top quarter of the ESCS index was 546, students in the third quarter scored 510, students in the second quarter scored 480 and students in the bottom quarter scored 461.

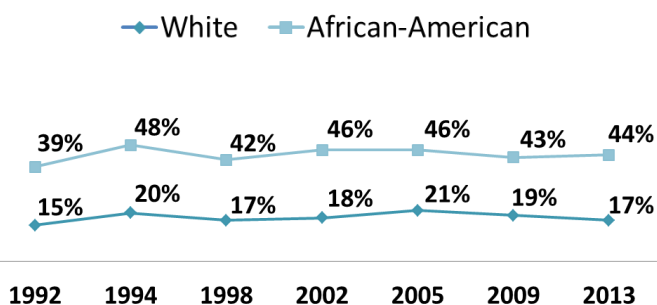
### Comparing the average reading score of African-American and white students on the National Assessment of Education Progress



**Percentage of students who scored at or above Proficient on the 12<sup>th</sup> grade National Assessment of Education Progress**



**Percentage of students who scored below Proficient on the 12<sup>th</sup> grade National Assessment of Education Progress**



Above, the gap in achievement can be seen across grade levels; however, it has also been present throughout the years. The percentage of 12<sup>th</sup> grade white students at or above “Proficient” in reading has been more than two times as high as African-American students. In 2013, the percentage of white students who were at or above “Proficient” in reading was almost three times as high.<sup>x</sup>

**Afterschool Programs Successfully Developing Students’ Literacy**

As the U.S. continues to struggle to improve the literacy skills of its students—with more than 6 in 10 elementary, middle and high school students below “Proficient” in reading—it is clear that

additional supports are necessary to ensure that all students leave school with a strong foundation in literacy. Afterschool and summer learning programs are ideal partners to support literacy efforts, offering an environment that looks different than the school day to engage and excite students about literacy and takes advantage of the vast amount of time outside of the school day and school year to help students catch up and keep up in literacy.

A steady stream of evaluations over the course of the past decade has found that afterschool programs are successfully developing students’ literacy skills and raising achievement in this area. For instance, an evaluation of Save the Children—an afterschool program providing literacy support to elementary and middle school students in high-poverty rural communities—found that compared with students not enrolled in the program, afterschool program participants made greater gains on standardized reading assessments, read more books and read books of greater difficulty.<sup>xi</sup> An evaluation of Higher Achievement—an academically focused afterschool program for middle school students in Washington, D.C., that includes a strong focus on reading comprehension—found that after two years in the program, students improved their standardized test scores in reading.<sup>xii</sup>

Research has also found that programs where literacy is not the primary focus can have a positive effect on students’ literacy achievement. Statewide evaluations of programs receiving 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers (21<sup>st</sup> CCLC) funding in Rhode Island, Texas and Washington—afterschool programs that provide a variety of activities, such as homework help, physical activity, academic enrichment, and arts and music—found that students regularly participating in the program made gains in their reading, as well as math, achievement.<sup>xiii</sup> An evaluation of New Hampshire’s 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC-funded programs

found that 9 in 10 principals reported that programs played a role in improved literacy skills among students who participated in the programs.<sup>xiv</sup>

The latter findings regarding the positive effect programs that may not have a specific literacy focus can have on a student’s reading and writing ability align with assessments that have found that students who find the material enjoyable and are engaged in reading perform better in school. For instance, the NAEP asked 12<sup>th</sup> graders how they regarded reading. It found that students who agreed with the statement “Reading is enjoyable” were more likely to have a higher score in reading than students who disagreed with the statement. Four in 10 12<sup>th</sup> graders who scored above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile in NAEP reading strongly agreed that reading is enjoyable, compared with 8 percent of 12<sup>th</sup> graders who scored below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile.<sup>xv</sup> Conversely, only 4 percent of 12<sup>th</sup> graders who scored above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile

**Percentage of 12<sup>th</sup> graders who scored above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile in reading based on their responses to the statement “Reading is enjoyable”**

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree



**Percentage of 12<sup>th</sup> graders who fell below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile in reading based on their responses to the statement “Reading is enjoyable”**

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree



strongly disagreed with the statement “Reading is enjoyable,” compared with the 21 percent of high school seniors who scored below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile.

Additionally, a Gallup analysis of results from their student poll found that schools where students scored higher in student engagement—even after controlling for socioeconomic status—saw higher academic achievement scores when compared with the state average. Their analysis found that schools where students’ average engagement scores were within the highest quartile were 50 percent more likely to be above the statewide reading achievement scores compared with schools with student engagement scores in the lowest quartile.<sup>xvi</sup>

Afterschool and summer learning programs are also helping raise the achievement of students who are most in need of support with the subject matter. Public Profit’s evaluation of afterschool programs in the Oakland, Calif., area found that the programs’ English Language Learner students who attended the program for 25 days increased their likelihood of re-designation as English fluent by 25 percent and those who attended a program for 100 days increased the likelihood by 40 percent.<sup>xvii</sup> A meta-analysis synthesizing 35 afterschool program studies found that afterschool programs had positive and significant effects among students at risk of failure in reading.<sup>xviii</sup> Examining the research on summer learning programs, an evaluation of the BELL (Building Education Leaders for Life) Summer program found that middle school students who were the furthest behind in reading made the greatest gains, gaining 7.2 months of reading skills during the course of the summer program.<sup>xix</sup>

## A Snapshot of Afterschool Programs Engaging Students in Literacy

With more than 10 million students in an afterschool program—more than 2 million of whom are in middle school<sup>xx</sup>—programs are providing integral literacy supports during the out-of-school-time hours. An Afterschool Alliance national household survey found that among parents with a child in an afterschool program, more than 7 in 10 report that their children’s programs provide opportunities for reading or writing (72 percent) and homework assistance (77 percent).<sup>xxi</sup> Below is a sampling of the multitude of ways in which afterschool programs are finding interesting and creative ways to grow students’ engagement in reading and writing, developing their critical thinking skills, and helping to foster a love and appreciation for reading and writing.

*Demonstrating to students the vast range of activities that develop literacy skills, using subjects such as music and the arts to draw students in*

**“Life Lines” Community Arts Project**, located in New York’s Sunset Park neighborhood in Brooklyn, uses dance, theater, music, creative writing and visual arts as entry points into a literacy-rich environment for their students. The free, year-round afterschool program’s variety of art forms are steeped in literacy skill-building activities. “Life Lines” students who take part in theater performances construct script dialogue, develop characters and think critically about plot structure and storylines. Students who participate in the program’s music and dance offerings work on clearly communicating their ideas and feelings through lyrics or interpretative dance movements, composing songs and poems and formulating how to translate stories and text into choreography. Through the program’s Composition Café, students tackle creative writing and draft short stories, learn to critique work and collaborate with their peers to provide feedback

on written work through the editing process. During the 2013-2014 school year, 95 percent of “Life Lines” students who were identified as struggling academically improved their grades in English language arts, math, Social Studies or science. Additionally, external evaluations by Metis Associates during the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years found that compared with their non-participating peers, “Life Lines” students made greater gains improving their school-day attendance.

*Linking literacy activities to real world situations that make learning relevant to students’ lives*

Students in the **Simpson Street Free Press** afterschool program (SSFP) develop their reading, writing and critical thinking skills in a real world and practical way—publishing newspapers. Serving students throughout Dane County, Wis., SSFP teaches students how to research stories, analyze findings, and plan and organize a storyline. A multiple-round peer review process not only helps to engage students in a thoughtful discourse of the content and gain confidence expressing their opinions, but exposes students to subject matter they may not be familiar with. SSFP also employs program alumni—who are either in college or are recent college graduates—as staff editors who serve as role models and mentors. The program challenges students by scaffolding assignments that grow in complexity as students progress through the program. The program publishes five different student newspapers, including *La Prensa*, a bilingual newspaper. All students who participate in the program complete four research or writing assignments per semester, and more than 80 percent of SSFP students improved their overall core subject GPAs within two semesters of attending the program.

*Engaging parents to help them take a more active role in their child's education and providing guidance on how to support their child's literacy development*

Ensuring that Atlanta's refugee students are academically prepared to enter high school is the central strategic focus of **New American Pathways' Bright Futures Afterschool Program**. The program provides targeted one-on-one support to students who are at the highest risk of falling behind academically, and staff use a customized literacy curriculum designed for English language learners. The program also offers a free eight-week summer camp that delivers a literacy skills curriculum, as well as weekly field trips and science lessons to round out the programming. Parent engagement is a strong component of the program, involving not only working with parents to develop their literacy skills and involving them in their children's progress at the program, but plugging parents into their children's schools and helping parents navigate the education system and build relationships with their children's teachers and school administrators. The program places an emphasis on parent engagement because of the strong belief that parents are children's most influential teachers. New American Pathways' Youth Learning Program provides a continuum of support for families, such as case managers who help parents understand the health care system, as well as social services, career services, financial literacy classes and immigration services. During the 2012-2013 school year, 100 percent of middle schoolers who regularly participated in the program increased at least one letter grade in English language arts and 97 percent were promoted to the next grade level on time.

*Aligning literacy support with the school day to give students who are falling behind the support they need to catch up and keep up with their peers*

Recognizing the need for a place for children to go after school in Terrell County, a rural area of Georgia, retired local educators founded the **Positive Direction Youth Center**. Providing academic enrichment is one of the program's primary goals, and middle school students in the program participate in a variety of activities focused on developing their literacy skills. The program aligns literacy activities with the school day, following the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards and schools' pacing charts, and has a strong relationship with schools, employing school-day teachers as staff. For a minimum of three hours per week in a small group setting, students in the program practice reading out loud, discuss what they have read with their peers and practice writing down their thoughts about the material. Students who display difficulties with reading or writing, including English language learner students and students with individualized education program plans, receive one-on-one coaching with a certified teacher. The Positive Direction Youth Center also uses the U.S. Department of Education's Afterschool Training Toolkit, located on the department's online professional learning and technical assistance website, You for Youth. In addition to academic enrichment, Positive Direction Youth Center students can participate in sports; computer and job skills development classes; arts and crafts; and field trips to museums, colleges, science centers, state parks and the zoo. The program provides students with snacks, a hot meal every day during the school week, and sends students home with a "Positive Direction Power Pack"—filled with nutritious food—for the weekend. Ninety-one percent of students in the program met or exceeded the reading, language arts or literature standards on the state Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests or End of Course Tests.



*Embedding student choice and voice within the program to give students ownership over their learning and make the literacy skill building all the more meaningful*

The **Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit-Second Stage Training Program** in Michigan lifts up students' ideas, voices and choices to engage them in arts programming that is imbued with literacy skill-building activities. Students in the year-round program are able to create original scripts about their city and are responsible for interviewing residents in the community; researching their topics of choice; developing storylines and characters; reading, reviewing and reworking scripts; and performing their final scripts. All students are paired with professional mentors who have one-on-one meetings with the students and academic check-ins to identify if additional academic support is needed. Mentors also provide referrals to community services for the students and their families, when necessary.

In addition to performing arts, students in the Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit's program are able to take advantage of financial literacy classes, leadership and professional development activities, community service projects and field trips to professional theater and dance performances and to college campuses. A three-year study of the program conducted by an external evaluator found that 64 percent of students new to the Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit expected to gain a college degree, but after participating in the program for one year, 97 percent of the students expected to graduate from college. Among program alumni, approximately 89 percent agreed that the program positively impacted their ability to consistently maintain high academic performance and see themselves as capable of academic success, and 81 percent reported that they experienced more personal growth and transformation at the program than in any other activity they participated in as a teenager.

## Conclusion

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy found that 14 percent of adults—approximately 30 million individuals—do not have the ability to perform simple, everyday literacy activities. Although schools are finding ways to increase time spent on teaching reading, the number of Americans who still do not possess basic literacy skills makes it clear that schools cannot do it alone. The vast space outside of the school day provides an infinite number of possibilities to provide students with the additional support they so desperately need. Afterschool and summer learning programs have the flexibility, time and partnerships that provide them with the ability to create fun, unique and hands-on experiences for their students that turn literacy from a passive activity to a relevant, engaging and interactive endeavor. From student-run newspapers to parent engagement to theater and dance, afterschool programs are finding ways to build on their students' school-day lessons and support their literacy skill development, providing them with the integral skills they will need as they continue on their path toward adulthood.

# Dollar General Afterschool Literacy Award Winner

## New American Pathways' Bright Futures Afterschool Program

New American Pathways' Bright Futures Afterschool Program (Bright Futures) is an afterschool program in Atlanta, Georgia, focused on promoting safety, stability, success and service for refugee students and their families. The program first began only serving elementary school students, but expanded its programming to serve middle schoolers in response to the need for afterschool programs for middle school students in the area.

The program is year-round and offered free of charge to students and their families. During the school year, Bright Futures is open from 3 to 5:30 p.m., providing a mix of academic enrichment, physical activity, character building classes and homework help. Students in the program learn about health and nutrition, taking part in cooking demonstrations and Zumba classes; play sports such as soccer and basketball; participate in arts and crafts; and engage in character building classes, developing their leadership skills, practicing their communication and collaboration skills, and learning more about personal responsibility.

Building students' literacy skills is a core component of Bright Futures, with a focus on ensuring that the students in the program—refugee students in particular—are equipped with the reading and writing skills they need to advance to the next grade level, be successful in high school and stay on track to graduate. Assessments of students are taken at the start of each school year, during the school year and again at the end of the school year to gauge reading ability, track students' literacy progress and develop students' individualized support based on their needs.

**Program Name:** New American Pathways' Bright Futures Afterschool Program

**Location:** Atlanta, GA

**Number of Middle Schoolers Served Per Day:** 60

**Year Started:** 2005

**Main Sources of Funding:**

- 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers
- Foundations

**Recommendations for Other Programs:**

- Implement a continuous improvement cycle to analyze if the program is meeting the needs of its students, families and the community, and what measures need to be taken to improve program supports
- Stay up-to-date on student progress to ensure that the program is providing students with the support they need most
- Find ways to show students that their opinion is valued by listening and giving them options and providing leadership roles within the program
- Take the time to engage your students' parents—it will help you better meet the needs of your students





Through the program’s targeted literacy support, students work in small groups reading passages from books to one another, discussing what they’ve read, reflecting and writing down their thoughts about the reading, and using art projects—such as drawing—to portray their reading assignments. Students who are falling behind in school receive one-on-one mentoring. Bright Futures’ staff stay in contact with their students’ school teachers throughout the year to keep up-to-date on the classroom progress of their students. The program also has the school’s data coach on staff to help identify the students who are in need of extra help.

Engaging parents in their child’s learning is incredibly important to Bright Futures, and it shows through the resources, time and staff the program dedicates to involve parents in the program. There is a parent engagement department within the program, with dedicated staff as parent liaisons who go out into the community to talk to parents about the afterschool program and what it offers, help their students’ parents translate school applications and documents, refer parents to support services

available to them, and offer workshops for parents that help them to navigate and better understand their school system. Parent liaisons also work with school-day staff to make sure that they are culturally sensitive to their students and their parents.

Looking toward the future, the afterschool program is working on strengthening their collaboration with schools, seeking new partnerships with organizations and businesses within the community, and providing a continuum of care to their students—beginning in kindergarten and continuing on through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Bright Futures will use their Dollar General Afterschool Literacy Award to increase the number of students they are able to serve; expand programming that supports the development of literacy and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills; and purchase additional program supplies, such as books that students in the program have expressed interest in and books that tie into the character building and cultural activities offered by the program.

## Endnotes

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