

# When Aspirational Benchmarks Become Public Verdicts: Revisiting NAEP Proficiency

by Dr. Elfrieda (Freddy) H. Hiebert

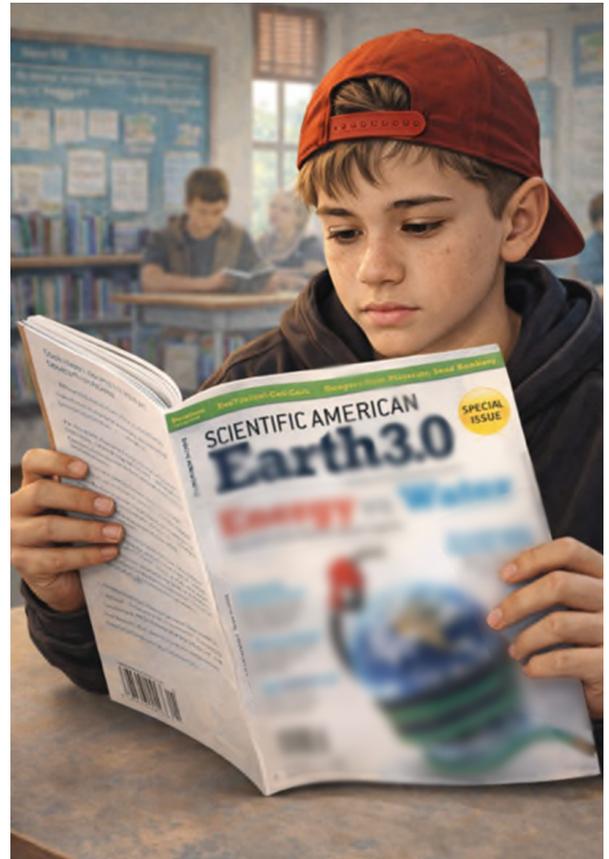
In 2025, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that 30% of eighth graders reached the Proficient level in reading on its 2024 assessment, 37% performed at Basic, and 33% were categorized as Below Basic. Headlines followed swiftly, describing a deepening crisis in reading (Goldstein, 2025). Education officials suggested that the decline reflected deeper systemic weaknesses in literacy instruction and student engagement (U.S. Department of Education, January 2025). The implication was unmistakable: American students are not reading well, and American schools are not teaching well.

But before accepting that interpretation, we must ask a foundational question: What does NAEP Proficiency actually represent? Is it intended to describe what is developmentally appropriate for most eighth graders, or does it represent a more ambitious target?

## The Framework Architecture of NAEP

Historically, NAEP frameworks have been constructed as forward-looking documents. Panels of educators, scholars, and policymakers are convened not simply to describe existing patterns of performance, but to articulate broad educational aims—the kinds of reading, reasoning, and analytic abilities it is hoped students could attain. The mandate to the 2026 Reading Framework panel makes its aspirational character explicit: members were charged with establishing “a vision (in the form of guidelines and aspirational goals) reflecting current issues within the educational context” (Forzani et al., 2022, p. 161). This is not a directive to describe normative developmental milestones. It is a directive to articulate ambitious performance expectations.

This concern is not new. Two congressionally mandated evaluations have questioned how NAEP achievement levels should be interpreted. Pellegrino et al. (1999) concluded that “NAEP achievement-level results do not appear to be reasonable compared with other external information about students’ achievement” (p. 7). Nearly two decades later, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine called for stronger evidence linking NAEP performance to meaningful real-world outcomes



(Koenig & Edley, 2017).

Yet in public discourse, Proficient is routinely treated as a developmentally normative milestone. When large percentages of students fall below it, the result is read as evidence of systemic failure. But that interpretation depends entirely on what the benchmark was designed to do. Aspirational goals mark the outer edge of what students might achieve — not immediate expectations. By contrast, developmentally aligned expectations describe the level of performance that is consolidated for most students at a given stage. Confusing the two transforms ambitious growth targets into diagnostic verdicts—and turns high standards into public indictments.

### **An Illustration of an Aspirational Task**

What does an aspirational benchmark look like in practice? The 2024 Grade 8 NAEP reading assessment offers a revealing example. One released passage from that assessment—the source of those crisis headlines—was “Growing Vertical” (Fischetti, 2008), drawn from *Scientific American*. According to its publisher, *Scientific American* serves “leaders and policy makers who require authoritative information to drive innovation” (Springer Nature, 2021). In educational contexts, its texts are treated as Grade 12 and college-level material (Newsela, 2014). In other words, this passage on the eighth-grade assessment functions within instructional systems as an upper-secondary or postsecondary benchmark.

The difficulty, however, is not only the complexity of the text but what students are asked to do with it. Consider one released question: identify two potential problems with the argument and explain how the author responds to each, using evidence from the text—all in writing, under timed conditions. NAEP does include a separate assessment designed specifically to measure writing ability (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012); yet here, within the reading assessment, the writing demands are substantial. It is precisely this combination of text and task complexity that makes the Proficient level aspirational.

### **A Developmentally Aligned Alternative**

A developmentally aligned version of this task would not lower standards. It would disentangle constructs. The same argumentative content can be presented in a text with a somewhat smaller proportion of highly technical vocabulary while still maintaining intellectual rigor. The task itself could be more precisely scoped to reading: students might identify one concern raised in the article and explain in a sentence or two how the author responds—or identification of the concern could be supported through a selected-response item, with the written portion focused solely on explanation. Such tasks still assess inferential comprehension and understanding of argument structure. What they reduce are the demands of sustained analytic composition.

When a reading assessment requires advanced written performance of eighth graders to

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demonstrate understanding of a college-level text, it raises the threshold for what counts as proficiency. The distinction between aspirational and developmentally aligned expectations is not about lowering standards. It is about aligning measurement with developmental reality and construct clarity.

### **When Aspirations Become Accusations**

When headlines declare a “deepening crisis in reading,” the language carries weight. Crisis implies widespread failure—that students cannot read and that teachers cannot teach. But that conclusion rests on an assumption: that NAEP Proficiency represents a developmentally typical expectation rather than an aspirational benchmark of advanced analytic performance that blends complex reading and extended writing.

If the standard was designed to articulate a vision of where we hope students will go, it should not be treated as a verdict on where most students currently are. Ambitious goals are essential—they push systems forward. But when aspirational benchmarks are misread as diagnostic norms, high expectations become public condemnation.

None of this is to say that reading achievement is not a genuine concern. Many students do not read enough, widely enough, or with sufficient support to develop the fluency and comprehension they need—and there is real and important work to be done there.

There is also a smaller group of students for whom reading presents genuine and significant challenges. But even here, the picture is more nuanced than crisis rhetoric suggests. Analyses of oral reading fluency indicate that students even at around the 6th to 7th percentiles can recognize 94 to 95% of the words in texts where half of the words are multisyllabic—a meaningful foundation (University of Oregon, 2022). For these students, the answer is not to return to the beginning and restart decoding instruction—as some interventions do. Students who can already recognize the great majority of words in polysyllabic-rich texts need vocabulary development and reading volume, not a regimen designed for students who cannot yet decode. For students below that threshold—those who are still developing basic word recognition—different and more targeted interventions are indeed needed. The point is not that struggle doesn’t exist, but that different profiles of difficulty require different responses, and a single crisis narrative obscures that distinction.

The work that is required is not well served by a narrative that treats an aspirational benchmark as the measure of adequate development. Before we declare a crisis of competence, we should first ask whether we are confusing a target with a tally—and mistaking an advanced analytic benchmark for a developmentally appropriate performance.

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# Not Zero: Why Adolescent Reading Interventions Should Start Where Students Are

by Dr. Elfrieda (Freddy) H. Hiebert

**T**he most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress Reading Assessment reported that large percentages of eighth and twelfth graders did not reach the Proficient level in reading. That headline is sobering—and easy to misinterpret. Not reaching Proficient does not mean students cannot read. More often, it means they lack the speed, stamina, and word-level efficiency required to manage complex academic texts independently.

Yet too many interventions respond by sending adolescents back to the beginning—as if a thirteen- or seventeen-year-old were encountering print for the first time. This contradicts what every major theory of learning affirms: instruction must begin with what learners already know. Cognitive psychology, schema theory, Piaget, Bruner, Vygotsky, even behaviorism—across profound theoretical differences, the starting point is never zero.

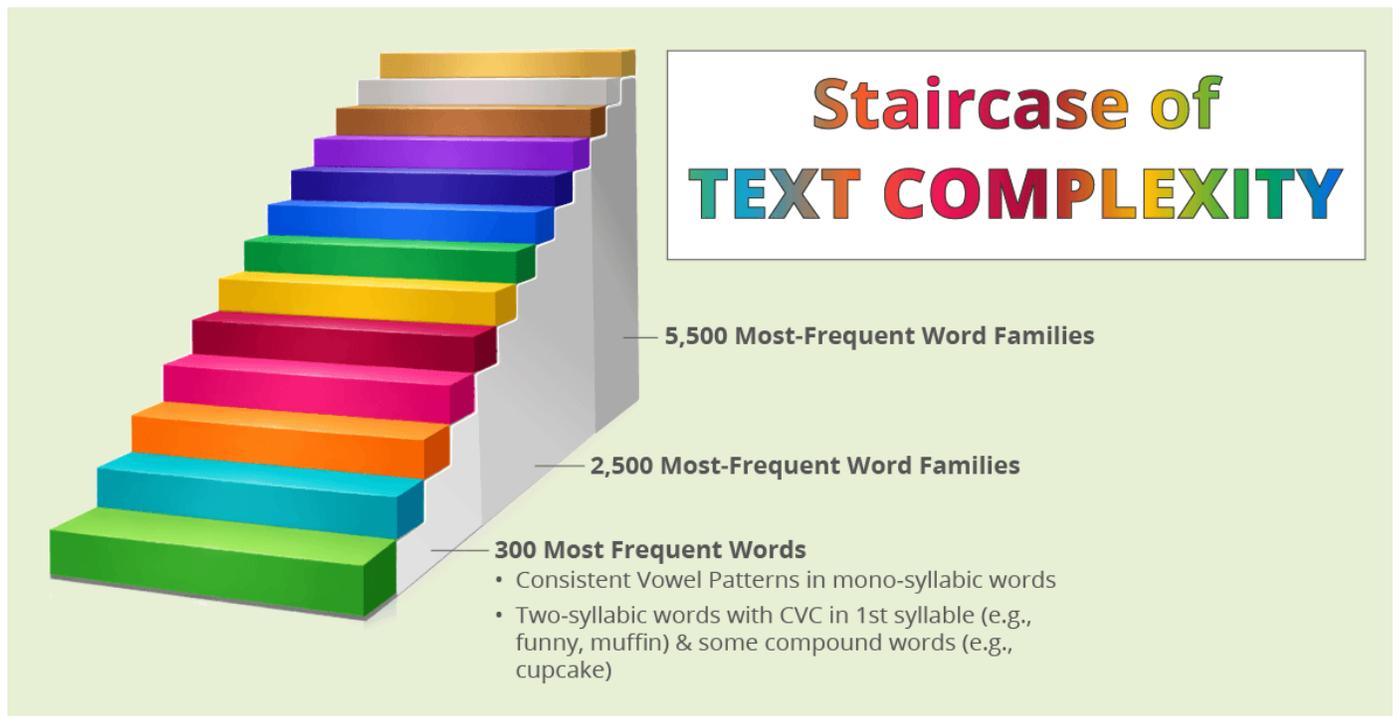
Adolescent readers who score below Proficient are not at zero. Most recognize the vast majority of words on oral reading fluency tasks. Many comprehend grade-level content when it is read aloud. What constrains them are specific, identifiable challenges: multisyllabic words, morphological complexity, insufficient automaticity across extended text.

A small percentage of students with neurobiological processing disorders require highly specialized intervention delivered by trained specialists—work that is essential and grounded in a distinct research base. But for the majority of adolescents who aren't highly proficient readers, the need is different. They require instruction that builds from existing competence, targeting the precise features that limit fluency and comprehension, paired with meaningful volume in texts worth reading.

When we begin at zero, we waste time and erode motivation. When we begin where students actually are, we align practice with theory—and give adolescents the forward momentum they deserve.



## Climbing the Staircase of Automaticity: Why Volume and Design Matter in Adolescent Reading



by Dr. Elfrieda (Freddy) H. Hiebert

It is hard to become automatic at something you do rarely. We know this in every domain of life. You don't become fluent on the piano by practicing once a week. You don't develop a reliable tennis serve by picking up a racket once a month. Reading is no different.

Yet many adolescents read very little—either in school or beyond it. The common narrative is that struggling middle and high school readers “can't read.” In reality, for the vast majority (apart from the 4–5% with neurobiological processing challenges), the issue is not inability. It is insufficient automaticity. They can recognize many words. They simply do not recognize them quickly enough, consistently enough, or across long stretches of text to sustain comprehension.

Automaticity is built through volume. But volume alone is not enough. Volume must be designed. At TextProject, we have built a coherent Staircase of Automaticity in Reading. At the base are vowel patterns in monosyllabic words and the most frequent morphological families—the word zones that dominate English text. From there, students encounter an expanding set of the 2,500 most frequent morphological families, carefully embedded in meaningful texts. Across the full portfolio, more than 5,500 high-utility morphological families and morphologically complex words appear in ways that ensure repetition without monotony.

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The goal is not simplified content. It is substantive, knowledge-building text written with linguistic intention. Likely unfamiliar words recur. Morphological families appear across texts. Words that occur often in school texts, including general academic vocabulary, show up often enough for students to gain speed and confidence with them. In short, students get enough practice with the words that matter most.

When adolescents read texts designed in this way, something important happens. Words that once required effort become effortless. Attention shifts from decoding to meaning. Fluency stabilizes. Comprehension deepens.

Automaticity is not a mystery. It is the predictable outcome of well-designed, sustained practice. If we want adolescents to read with confidence and power, we must give them not just more text—but the right text, in sufficient quantity, over time. That is the work of TextProject.