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The magic of 15 minutes: Reading practice and reading growth

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This is the second entry in the Education Leader's Guide to Reading Growth, a 7-part series about the relationship between reading practice, reading growth, and overall student achievement.

In our last post, we examined how reading practice characteristics differ between persistently struggling students and students who start out struggling but end up succeeding—and how strong reading skills are linked to high school graduation rates and college enrollment rates.

However, it's not just struggling readers who could benefit from more reading practice. A study of the reading practices of more than 9.9 million students over the 2015–2016 school

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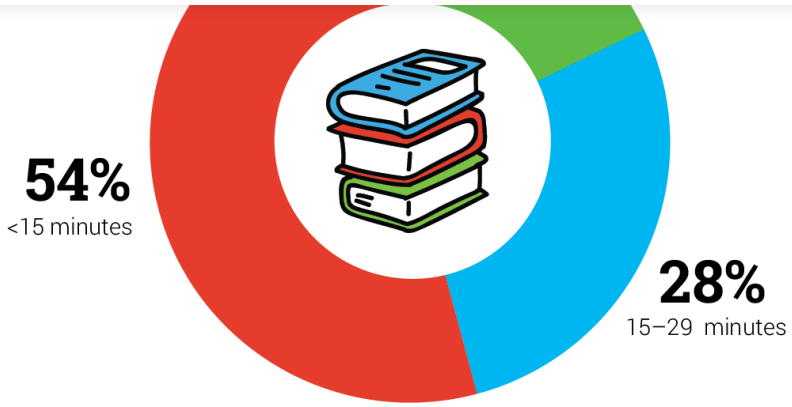
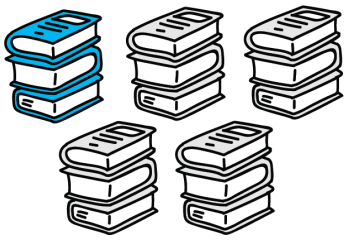


Fewer than **one in five** students averaged a half-hour or more of reading per day, and fewer than **one in three** read between 15 and 29 minutes on a daily basis.



Fewer than **one in five students** reads an average of **30 or more minutes per day.**

The problem is that 15 minutes seems to be the "magic number" at which students start seeing substantial positive gains in reading achievement, yet less than half of our students are reading for that amount of time.

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15 minutes seems to be the "magic number" at which students start seeing substantial positive gains in reading achievement; students who read just over a half-hour to an hour per day see the greatest gains of all.

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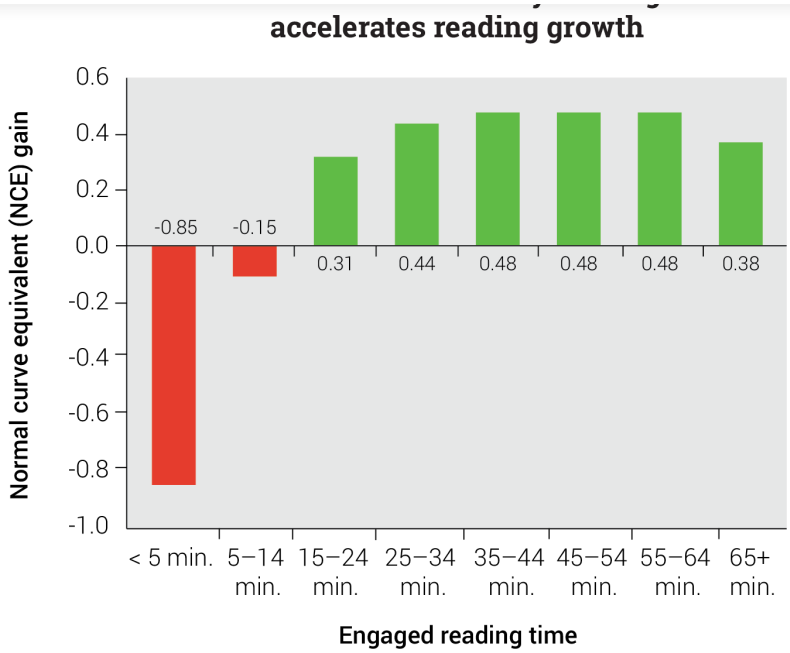

Although many other factors—such as quality of instruction, equitable access to reading materials, and family background—also play a role in achievement, the consistent connection between time spent reading per day and reading growth cannot be ignored.

Moreover, if reading practice is linked to reading growth and achievement, then it follows that low levels of reading practice should correlate to low levels of reading performance and high levels of reading practice should connect to high levels of reading performance. This pattern is precisely what we see in student test data.

Strong connections between reading practice and achievement

An analysis of more than 174,000 students' Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores revealed that connection between reading engagement and reading performance was **"moderately strong and meaningful"** in all 32 countries examined, including the United States.[3] On average, students who spent more time reading, read more diverse texts, and saw reading as a valuable activity scored higher on the PISA's combined reading literacy scale.

The study also found a student's level of reading engagement was more highly correlated with their reading achievement than their socioeconomic status, gender, family structure, or

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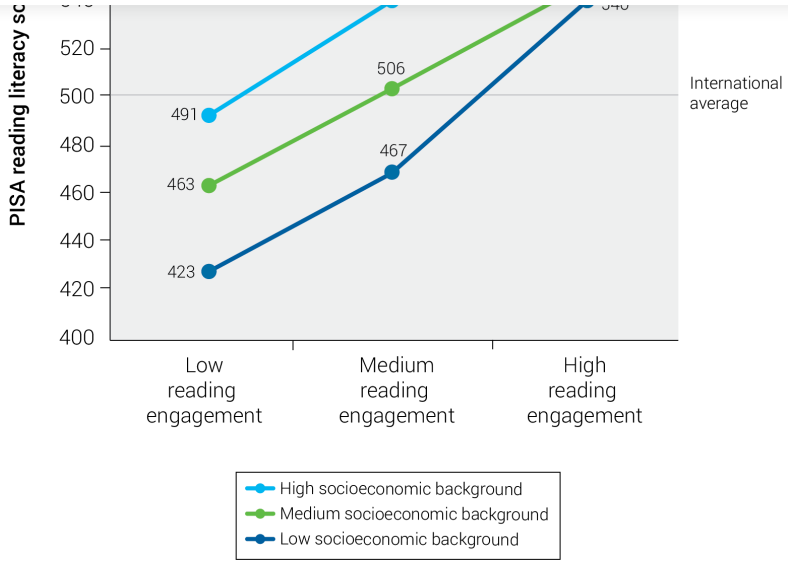

Overall, students with high reading engagement scored significantly above the international average on the combined reading literacy scale, regardless of their family background. The opposite was also true, with students with low reading engagement scoring significantly below the international average, no matter their socioeconomic status.

The authors suggested that reading practice can play an "important role" in closing achievement gaps between different socioeconomic groups. Frequent high-quality reading practice may help children compensate for—and even overcome—the challenges of being socially or economically disadvantaged, while a lack of reading practice may erase or potentially reverse the advantages of a more privileged background. In short, reading practice matters for kids from all walks of life.

For students within the United States, reading practice may not simply be more important than socioeconomic status—it may also be more important than many school factors.

Looking at only American students' PISA scores, we see that reading engagement had a higher correlation with reading literacy achievement than time spent on homework, relationships with teachers, a sense of belonging, classroom environment, or even pressure to achieve (which had a negative correlation). In addition, a regression analysis showed achievement went up across **all** measures of reading literacy performance when reading engagement increased.

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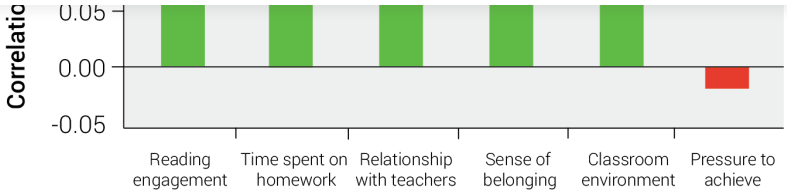
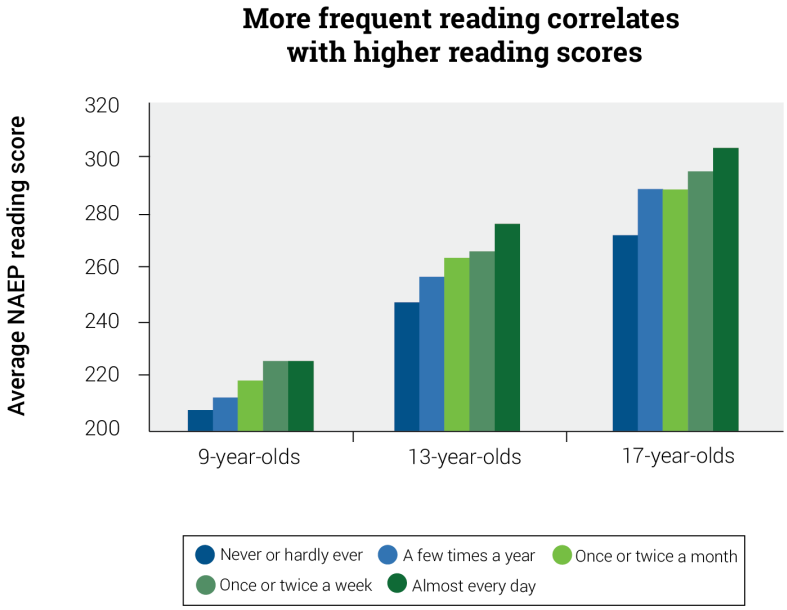


Although the PISA only assesses 15-year-olds, similar patterns can be seen in both younger and older American students. In 2013, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) compared students' National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores with their reading habits.[4] For all age groups, they found a clear correlation between the frequency with which students read for fun and their average NAEP scores: The more frequently students read, the higher their scores were.



What is especially interesting about the NAEP results is that the correlation between reading frequency and reading scores was true for all age groups and the score gaps increased across the years. Among 9-year-olds, there was only an 18-point difference between children who reported reading "never or hardly ever" and those who read "almost every day." By age 13, the gap widened to 27 points. At age 17, it further increased to 30 points.

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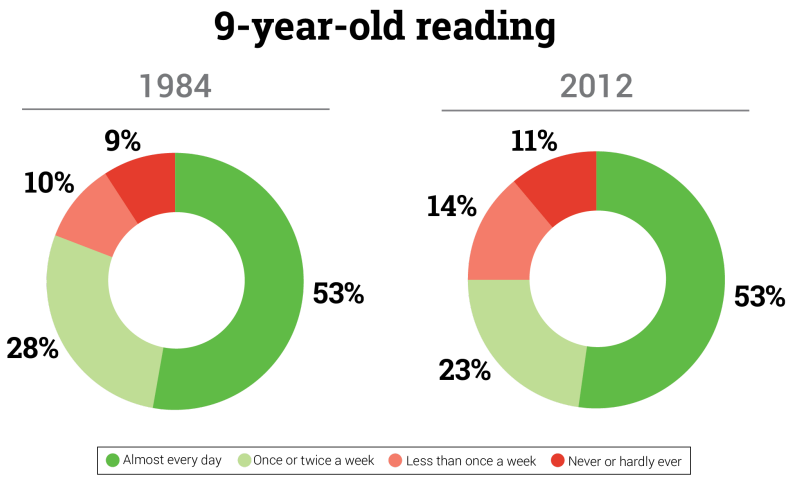
Troubling declines in reading practice

Over the last three decades, reading rates have dramatically declined in the United States. In 1984, NAEP results showed the vast majority of 9-year-olds read for fun once or more per week, with more than half reporting reading almost every day. Only one in five reported reading two or fewer times per month. By 2012, 25% of all 9-year-olds were reading for pleasure fewer than 25 days per year.[5]



For older students, the drop is even more precipitous. In 1984, 35% of 13-year-olds read for fun almost every day, and another 35% read one or two times per week—in total, more than two-thirds of 13-year-olds reported reading at least once a week. In 2012, **nearly half** read less than once a week.

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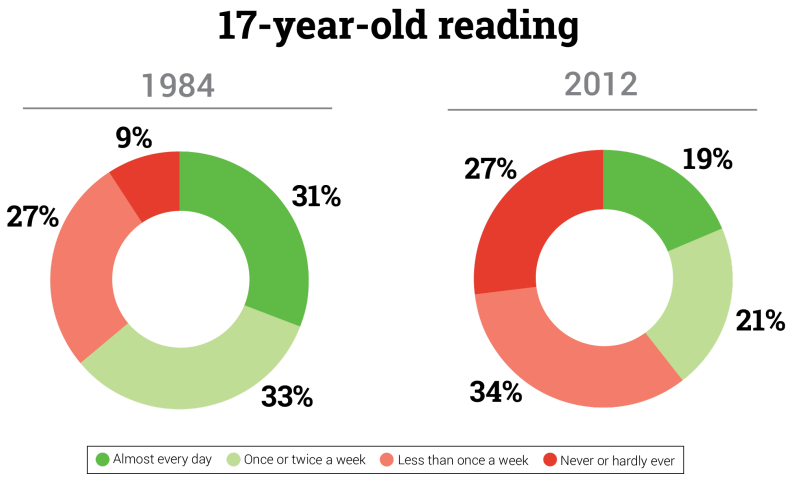
Among 17-year-olds, the percentage reading almost every day dropped from 31% in 1984 to only 19% in 2012, while the percentage who read for fun less than once a week rose from 36% to 61%. The number of 17-year-olds reporting reading "never or hardly ever" actually **tripled.**



And the decline in reading is not due to students spending more time on homework in 2012 than in 1984. During the same time period, the percentage of students who reported spending more than an hour on homework actually **declined.**

In 1984, 19% of 9-year-olds, 38% of 13-year-olds, and 40% of 17-year-olds reported spending an hour or more on homework the day prior to the NAEP. In 2012, those numbers had dropped to 17% for 9-year-olds, 30% for 13-year-olds, and 36% for 17-year-olds.

Why are we seeing the greatest gaps and the greatest declines in the oldest students? Although many different factors are likely at play, one of them might be that the effects of reading practice are cumulative over a student's schooling, especially when it comes to vocabulary.

The long-term effects of reading practice

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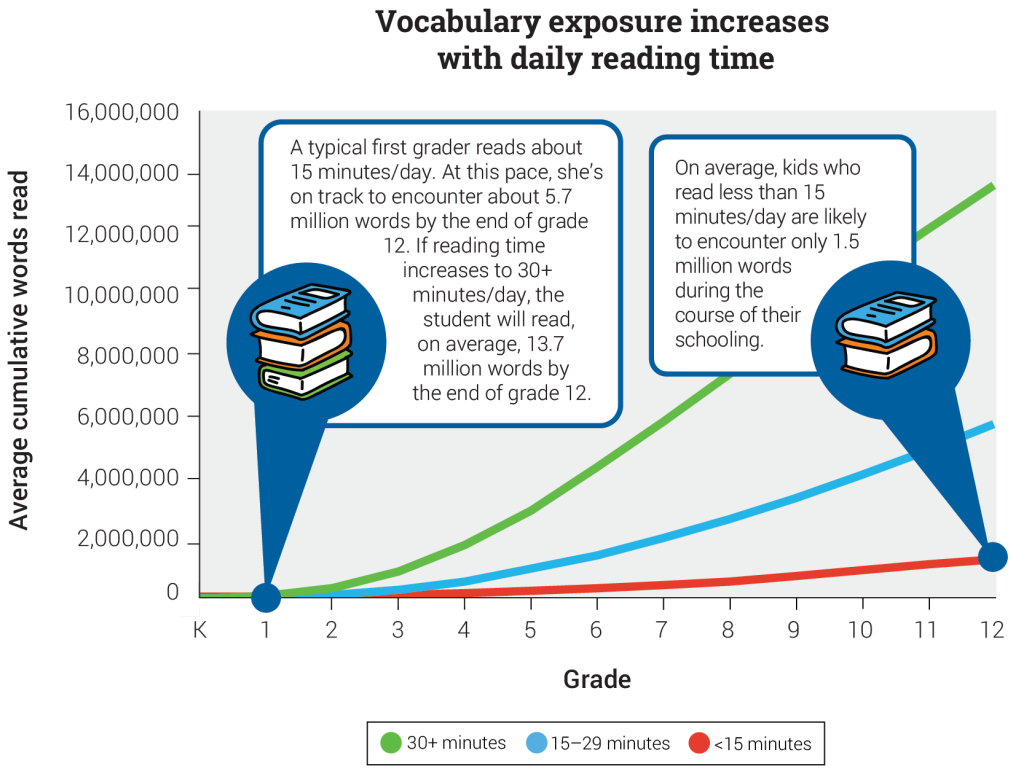

Some researchers estimate students learn one new word of vocabulary for every thousand words read.[6] Using this ratio, a student who reads only 1.5 million words would learn only 1,500 new vocabulary words from reading, while a student who reads 13.7 million words would learn 13,700 new vocabulary terms—more than **nine times** the amount of vocabulary growth.

This is especially important when we consider that students can learn far more words from reading than from direct instruction: Even an aggressive schedule of 20 new words taught each week will result in only 520 new words by the end of the typical 36-week school year. This does not mean that reading practice is "better" than direct instruction for building vocabulary—direction instruction is key, but teachers can only do so much of it. Instead, we ask educators to imagine the potential for vocabulary growth if direct instruction, structural analysis strategies, and reading practice are all used to reinforce one another.

Vocabulary plays a critical role in reading achievement. Research has shown that **more than half** the variance in students' reading comprehension scores can be explained by the depth

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exposure and reading achievement, but not enough students are getting enough reading practice to drive substantial growth?

The answer seems clear. We need to make increasing reading practice a top priority for all students in all schools. Making reading practice a system-wide objective may be one of the most important things we can do for our students' long-term outcomes, especially when we combine it with high-quality instruction and effective reading curricula. It is time to put as much focus on reading practice as we do on school culture, student-educator relationships, and socioeconomic factors.

However, not all reading practice is built the same. Quantity matters, but so does quality. In the next post in this series, we explore how you can ensure your students are getting the most out of every minute of reading practice.

To read the next post in this series, click the banner below.

References

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[4] National Center for Education Statistics. (2013). *The nation's report card: Trends in academic progress 2012 (NCES 2013 456).* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences.
[5] National Center for Education Statistics. (2013). Table 221.30: Average National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scale score and percentage distribution of students, by age, amount of reading for school and for fun, and time spent on homework and watching TV/video: Selected years, 1984 through 2012. *Digest of Education Statistics.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences.