

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

“English Literacy Rates Across the United States”

A Thesis Submitted

By

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### Abstract

Literacy rates among students in the United States have been at an all-time low for the last several years. There have been many factors to this including but not limited to, the COVID-19 pandemic, technology, teacher shortages, and chronic absenteeism. This study looks into the literacy rate decline, the mentioned factors, and what is being done to improve the literacy proficiency among students across the country. This study also looks at what is specifically being done for school divisions across the Commonwealth of Virginia, focusing on one school in particular, Culpeper Middle School.

*Keywords:* literacy, education, student learning

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. Factors.....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 COVID-19.....	12
2.2 Technology in the Classroom Learning Environment.....	15
2.3 Artificial Intelligence.....	17
2.4 Teacher Shortages.....	22
2.5 Chronic Absenteeism.....	27
<b>3. Case Study.....</b>	<b>29</b>
3.1 Virginia Literacy Act.....	32
3.2 Technology in the Classroom Learning Environment .....	46
3.3 Absenteeism.....	48
<b>4. Conclusions.....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Appendix.....</b>	<b>72</b>
A.1 Interview Questions.....	72
A.2 Background on Interviewees.....	74
A.3 Acronyms.....	76
A.4 Data Source on Culpeper Middle School.....	76
A.5 Attachments.....	77

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Over the last decade English Language Arts skills have declined in students throughout the United States. On average, reading scores have declined 4 points during the 2022-2023 school year compared to scores from the 2019-2020 school year (Carrillo, 2023). Students are not proficient in the fundamental skills of reading and writing that they are required to be on grade level. What is the reasoning behind this? Many researchers believe that it could be due to technology, including AI software the effects of AI, online review games, or it is the remaining effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to help bring English Language Arts skills back up by improving literacy, there are several suggestions that could be made. Keeping students engaged in reading by gathering their interests and using grade-level material that involves their interests can help improve students idea and motivation of reading and learning. Schools can also keep students interested by having clubs, organizations, student-teacher relationship activities to keep the students motivated to go to school. This will help improve attendance and overall morale of the students. By eliminating technology distractions, teaching grade-level appropriate material that is interesting to the students, and having a plan for absenteeism, literacy scores should increase among students across the United States.

What does not being proficient in reading mean and how is that measured? According to ‘Lexercise’, being on grade level, for reading specifically, “is defined as the average passage difficulty level (as measured by one of the many readability formulas) that most students at a specific grade level can read with understanding” (Blackley, 2022). Making sure that students

are reading on grade level is important because there are various different forms of reading material that humans need to be able to read and comprehend in order to be successful in life.

For example, people must be capable of reading ingredients on labels, recipes, pharmacy labels, schedules, manuals, articles, books, etc. (Blackley, 2022). A student must also be able to comprehend and differentiate between the different items. For example, students should understand the difference between a news article and an opinion piece article that is found in a newspaper, magazine, or journal.

The National Center for Education Statistics has kept a record of student reading achievement for nearly 50 years. According to their recent studies, "...average scores for age 9 students in 2022 declined 5 points in reading and 7 points in mathematics compared to 2020. This is the largest average score decline in reading since 1990, and the first ever score decline in mathematics" (NCES, 2022). If this is a national occurrence then it is a problem that the majority of schools are facing across the country; students cannot read and perform to the level they are expected to.

*Average reading and mathematics scale scores on the long-term trend National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP): Selected years, 1971 through 2022*



Figure 1: Graph demonstrating the decline of reading scores from 1971 to 2022 (NCES, 2022).

To measure growth and achievement by students, standardized tests and benchmarks are given. This allows teachers and schools to see what their students did well on and what the students need to work on. By definition, a standardized test, “is any form of a test that (1) requires all test takers to answer the same questions, or a selection of questions from a common bank of questions, in the same way, and that (2) is scored in a “standard” or consistent manner, which makes it possible to compare the relative performance of individual students or groups of students” (Education Reform, 2015). While these forms of assessments have been around since the 1800s, their popularity and dependability became more familiar in 2002 when the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) started (ProCon, 2020). The main purpose for these tests are to hold schools and teachers accountable when evaluating student performance and identifying academic gaps in student learning. Academic standards frequently change as studies find what students need extra help with or what standards need to be more specific for student learning. By administering assessments, data is able to be given to back the standards that are taught to students.

An article from a Michigan news station also reported on student scores in their state averaging below grade level. “Roughly 60% of Michigan third graders are not reading at a proficient level, according to results from the 2024 Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress, known as MSTEP” (Anderson, 2024). They have seen the decline progress since 2021. In 2024, their proficiency level was at a 39%, which is the lowest that it has been (Anderson, 2024). One of the big problems that schools are noticing in Michigan is that the parents are not

putting in as much effort anymore to support student learning at home, especially literacy. This also applies directly to the Commonwealth of Virginia. More than half of the students in grades three through eight are either failing or at risk for failing their reading assessment that measures their growth at the end of the year (VDOE, 2024). Without students practicing their literacy skills at home, their academics are going to be affected all across the board in all subject areas.

After conducting research on English Language Arts proficiency scores, I looked more closely at data from Culpeper Middle School (CMS), in Culpeper, Virginia. Figure 2 below shows the downfall of scores over the last few years.

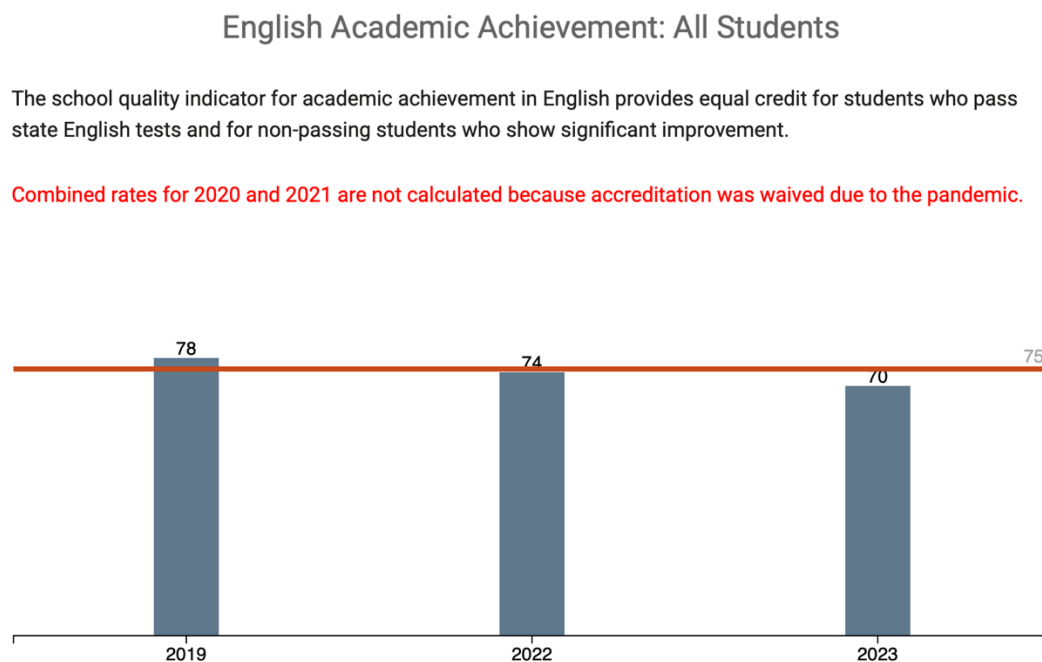


Figure 2: Graph demonstrating the Average English academic achievement at CMS (VDOE, 2023).



The passing rate for English proficiency is scoring a 75 or higher in a middle school setting, which includes 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade. In 2019, the average for Culpeper Middle School was a 78 with 1,095 students enrolled (VDOE, 2024). Pre-pandemic English proficiency scores were above the state average; however, after the pandemic occurred, scores started to decline. Scores were not calculated during 2020 or 2021 because of COVID-19, but in 2022, there was a four-point difference, with a slight increase of student enrollment at 1,111 (VDOE, 2024). The school's average was scoring a 74. Even the following year in 2023 the scores continued to subside to an even lower score of a 70 with their enrollment dropping down to a 1,066 (VDOE, 2024.).

In the 2016-2017 school year, three academic years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the overall passing score was an 80 among the students at CMS (VDOE, 2024). When looking at that year to the most recent year of 2023, the student average score dropped by ten points. There are many factors that may have contributed to scores dropping over those seven years. With the evolution of education over the last decade especially, learning has begun to be reshaped to fit the current state of student performance and academic needs (AB, 2023). This includes schools incorporating more “updated” learning material that catch the attention of students, and gamifying instruction to make learning more interactive. Students have very short attention spans, so it is easier for them to learn and stay engaged when they are excited about learning.

Without making the instruction exciting, students may lose focus sooner. With this in mind, teachers are trying to make the learning material more engaging to help students want to

learn and progress academically. “I am constantly trying to change the way I teach my lessons. Every year I feel like I am doing it differently because I try to keep up with what the kids are interested in. While it is a lot of work ahead of time, it does help the kids stay interested in the content that I am teaching” (S. Richards, personal communication, September 12, 2024). Mrs. Richards is a veteran teaching who has been teaching for 16 years. Throughout this thesis there are several individuals from Culpeper Middle School who gave their input on the decline of literacy and what is currently being done about it. Other teachers and staff include: Ms. Miller, a math teacher at Culpeper Middle School who has been in the education field for over a decade; Mrs. Richards, a current high school teacher that had previously been in the middle school setting; Mrs. Burke, a reading specialist in Virginia who was previously an elementary school teacher; Mr. Conley, a middle school science teacher in Virginia; and Mrs. McCallister, another veteran teacher who has over thirty years of experience teaching.

## Chapter 2: Factors

There are many factors that have added to the decline in literacy rates throughout the United States. Schools are dealing with these effects as they have been identified as main problems in the classroom. For the sake of this thesis, four factors were closely studied: The COVID-19 pandemic, technology advancements, teacher shortages, and chronic absenteeism among students.

### **2.1 COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic created several of obstacles for education. Whenever the natural hazard started, many schools shut down for two weeks. Being away from the classroom for a few weeks would not have any significant change to student learning. However, many schools went from being closed for two weeks to the remaining of the 2019-2020 school year through the 2020- 20221 school year. The most common form of education that was adapted for

students was virtual learning. Most schools in one way or another had students attend via their electronic devices. Were students learning and absorbing the correct amount of curriculum required to advance their skills? I do not believe that students were learning the correct amount of academic content during the pandemic.

While distance learning is much different than being in person in the classroom, students were still communicating with their teacher and being presented with material that they would have received in class. The virtual learning setting does offer students to a more relaxed and comfortable learning environment, but it also gives the teacher less control over the students in their class. The teacher cannot make sure that the student is focused and is free from distractions while trying to learn. A study conducted on English learning during the pandemic found that, “The average student’ assessments during COVID-19 quarantine were significantly lower than before its introduction. This fact may be associated with the increased anxiety of respondents against the lack of the usual daily routine, real-life communication, as well as a possible deterioration in the financial situation” (Kamal, Zubanova, Isaeva, & Movchun, 2021). There are so many factors to consider as to why performance was lower during the pandemic. This can also include students having to help around the house due to other family members falling ill, and possible noise distractions in the house due to other family members attending school and or work virtually. Regardless of what these factors are, students are nearly two years behind in school nationally than what they should be. That would require teachers to “have to teach 150 percent of a typical year’s worth of material for three years in a row- just to catch up” (Harvard

Graduate School of Education, 2023). Even though student academic performance rates were plummeting prior to the pandemic, having to shut down schools and improvise teaching online did not help.

With the shutdown of many schools during the pandemic, the Biden Administration had strongly encouraged schools to provide academic tutoring to help try to catch students up from the months of structured learning that they missed. In a study conducted by Matthew Kraft from Brown University, he had concluded that, out of almost 7,000 students that he looked at academically that were tutored from 2021 to 2023, there was only a small boost in reading scores, and no improvement in math. The tutoring had also failed to help students raise their course grades in both subjects as well (Barshay, 2024). “The tutoring had no structure to it,” said Mary Burke, a reading specialist that works in several schools around Virginia. “Schools were just giving students supplemental work that had no evidence to back up the support it was giving them,” she added. This would be why studies have found that the tutoring did not help our students around the country (M. Burke, personal communication, September 18, 2024). As a teacher myself, I did tutor 7<sup>th</sup> grade students after school post pandemic during the 2022-2023 school year. This was the school year that the Virginia Governor outlined the ALL IN Tutoring plan. The plan was designed to help students who either failed their Standards of Learning test or were at risk of failing (VDOE, n.d.). During the tutoring sessions that were twice a week for eight weeks, teachers were just given supplemental work to review topics that the students were currently learning in their English classes. The students that participated in after school tutoring

were students who were failing their English class at the time. Those students were typically the students that did not want to be at school at all. Therefore, this made the tutoring sessions difficult to get through as the students had no interest in being at school, let alone after school tutoring.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not help literacy scores increase based on the way teaching had to adapt to fit learner's needs, and in some ways, that was difficult or impossible to do. With technological advancements also happening over the last decade, including technology equipment such as Smartboards and computers, online teaching websites, and technology that students have access to at home, students have become more dependent on using it in their everyday life.

## **2.2 Technology in the Learning Environment**

Teaching is constantly evolving as technology continues to advance. With the advancements and increase in mobile technology, i.e. tablets, smartphones, Chromebooks, etc., devices are now more affordable for school districts. Most schools across the nation are a 1:1 school, meaning there is one piece of technology for each student. "At least 90% of educators said that they had at least one device for every middle and high school student by March of 2021, and 84% said the same of elementary school students, according to a survey by the EdWeekly Research Center" (Grove, n.d.). For example, a school may have provided each of its students with a Chromebook. "The level of engagement of students and their interest to accomplish educational tasks had increased in classes that used mobile technology" (Gerger,

2014). With the access to information becoming easier and student engagement becoming more of an interest, learning should become more enjoyable for students. To help with this, teachers can use educational apps and websites to assist in their teaching. For example, “Gimkit” is a website that teachers can use to help their students review topics. The teacher enters questions and answers onto their account. Students play by the teacher having to choose between various choices of gameshow style games. The students play the game and earn points or advance in the game by answering the questions correctly. “Games really helped me become engaged in school. That’s why I built ‘Gimkit’ - to be the kind of game I’d want to play in class” (Feinsilber, n.d.). Students love using technology and it piques their interests, but is it a major factor in their English proficiency declining?

While the students really enjoy playing review games on their devices, it may actually be harming their education. Another review game, “Kahoot!”, was reviewed in a 2014 study about its effectiveness in the classroom. “‘Kahoot!’, considering the results of this study, is essentially a waste of review time, when students could be using class time to study more efficiently” (Highlights, 2018). The objective of this game, similar to other online review games used in the classroom, is to be the fastest, or one of the fastest players to answer the question. By doing so, you earn points to advance you in the game. Students who just want to play the game are going to randomly select the answer choices to try to earn the most points to beat their classmates. The students do not absorb the material and content that is taught in the classroom (Highlights, 2018). Another reason why online review games may be a disservice to education is because

teachers, who create the questions, are not able to construct complex questions to deepen student thinking and learning because of the time limitations and answer choice word limit. Lastly, students are not able to receive feedback on the questions that they missed. Teachers can discuss and review the questions after the game, but not in the moment when students are still thinking on the topic because it is a timed game. Due to the lack of opportunity to pause and discuss during the games, this does not help the teacher with formative assessments in regard to student thinking and accurate performance in the game.

### **2.3 Artificial Intelligence**

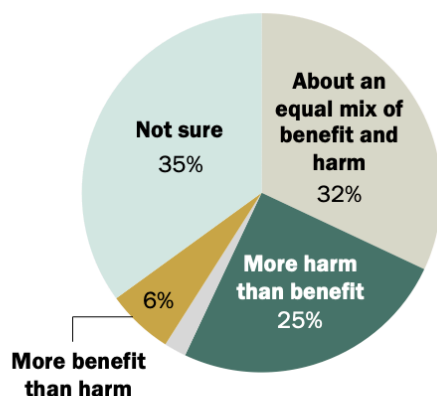
Another tool of technology used in the classroom is artificial intelligence (AI). AI has been used in the classroom by students to assist them in writing assignments and research projects. A research study that was conducted from the Pew Research Center surveyed over 2,5000 public school teachers across the United States. These teachers range from teaching kindergarten all the way up through twelfth grade. The research that was done also collected data from over 1,400 teenagers ranging from thirteen to seventeen years old (Lin, 2024). The data that was collected by Pew Center suggests that more secondary school teachers, middle and high school, have a more negative connotation of artificial intelligence than elementary school teachers do.



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### Many teachers are uncertain about the use of AI tools in K-12 education

*% of public K-12 teachers saying there is generally \_\_\_\_\_ when it comes to the use of artificial intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT, in K-12 education*



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer is shown but not labeled.

Source: Survey of U.S. public K-12 teachers conducted Oct. 17-Nov. 14, 2023.

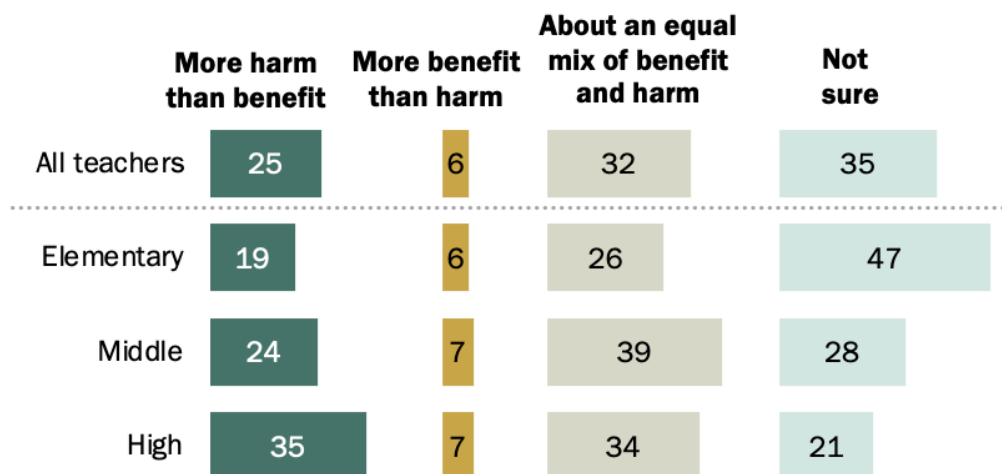
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Figure 3: A graph demonstrating the percentages of how teachers feel about the use of AI in the classroom (Lin, 2024).

## High school teachers are more likely than other teachers to view AI in K-12 education negatively

*% of public K-12 teachers saying there is generally \_\_\_\_ when it comes to the use of artificial intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT, in K-12 education*



Note: Shares of respondents who didn't offer an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. public K-12 teachers conducted Oct. 17-Nov. 14, 2023.

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Figure 4: Teacher statistics by level of the negative harm of the use of AI in the classroom (Lin, 2024).

Figure 3 above demonstrates how teachers between grade levels of kindergarten through twelfth grade view AI. 35%, the majority in this scenario, of teachers are unsure of the use of AI in the classroom. AI is still developing in a lot of areas and teachers are slowly learning how to figure it out to its best use in the classroom. Figure 4 shows specifics by school level of how teachers feel about if AI would be more helpful or harmful in the classroom. While middle and high school level students are more independent and can write and research on their own, they are more likely to use AI than elementary school aged students. The issue that middle and high

school teachers run into with artificial intelligence is that students have AI complete their assignments for them. This would be considered plagiarism, which can lead to serious consequences that may vary by school. The research conducted also says that, “Teens’ views on whether using ChatGPT is acceptable depend on what it’s being used for” (Lin, 2024).

The percentage of students who use ChatGPT
69% say it is acceptable to use it to research new topics.
39% say it is acceptable to use it to solve math problems.
20% say it is acceptable to use it to write essays.

Figure 5: Data from The Pew Research Center on student usage of ChatGPT.

“The percentage of students who say that ChatGPT is acceptable at all amazes me” (S. Richards, personal communication, September 12, 2024). Mrs. Richards is a 10th grade English teacher who has run into problems with students using AI in the classroom. “I love that it can be helpful in certain areas, but students need to be able to have their own critical thinking and creative writing skills” she explained. “I now have to spend extra time grading by putting student essays and research projects into a ChatGPT check site. I have caught students in the past using ChatGPT for their entire assignment. Students just do not have any motivation to come up with the work themselves. They are so used to everything being instant and done for them. This is really harming their writing skills,” (S. Richards, personal communication, September 12, 2024). Mrs. Richards, along with many other teachers, including myself, have taught the

importance of doing your own work and why you should not use AI, but students will still try to continue to use it.

Aside from classroom technology, cell phones have also been a big problem for schools. There are several states that have already, or are going to implement a cell phone ban in schools. This is to help prevent digital distractions among students and get them to socialize without the screens. “When you look around the cafeteria at lunch, all you see are students focused on their phones. They have no idea how to communicate with each other in person.” Mrs. Richards said. “I banned cell phones in my classroom for this reason. While they are allowed their phones in the cafeteria, it really saddens me to see them so invested in them. This is such a hard time for these kids developmentally at their age, and they are soaking up all of their knowledge through the phones” (S. Richards, personal communication, September 12, 2024).

A study by Hui-Chan Chu, Department of Computer Science and Information Management at Soochow University in Taiwan, was conducted on if mobile learning environments were helpful or harmful to student cognitive loads. While researchers initially thought that the technology integrated into the learning environment helped students in the long run, Hui-Chan Chu wanted to test student cognitive ability. Not only were cognitive loads of students tested, but also the learning outcomes how mobile learning vs traditional learning were evaluated. “Cognitive load theory is a multidimensional construct that represents the different loads that performing a particular task imposes on the cognitive system” (Chu, 2014). When conducting this study, two different classes of students were the participants. Both classes were

fifth graders; one class had thirty- three students, and the second class had thirty-one students.

By evaluating the e-learning and traditional learning, the study proved that students who were a part of the mobile learning group had cognitive overload when they needed to apply what they learned to real-world scenarios (Chu, 2014). Both groups of students were in the same learning setting, one class just learned the content with more technology involved. “The results showed that the students in the experimental group did not achieve as much as those in the traditional group” (Chu, 2014). The main reason that the students involved in the e-learning did not achieve as much as the traditional students was due to the high cognitive load they faced from technology.

While this study was conducted in 2014, with the advancement of technology since then, the cognitive load of students should lean to be even more overloading for their brains. “This is such an interesting study to look at. When thinking back to 2014 I do recall there being technology integrated into the classroom, but not like it is today obviously,” Ms. Miller stated. “As a teacher that has been through the technological advancements I do see the cognitive levels change of the students coming up each year. Even before 2014, you could tell it was starting. It was not nearly as bad as it is now though” (N. Miller, personal communication, September 10, 2024.) Now that teachers are noticing the dependency on technology for some of the students, some teachers may turn away from using technology, and even allowing phones on the student in their classroom. Some teachers will have students turn in their phones into a bin or calculator pocket on the wall at the beginning of class to ensure the phones are not a distraction. Creating a classroom community can be done much easier without the dependency on technology.

## 2.4 Teacher Shortages

Teacher shortages are happening all across the country, and the rate is growing rapidly. Data from the Virginia Department of Education shows that the rate has grown from 0.8% to 3.9% from the 2021-2022 school year to the 2022-2023 school year. At the beginning of the current school year, 2023-2024, the teacher vacancy rate was 4.8%. Along with this, most of the commonwealth has to solely rely on provisional licensed teachers instead to teach their students (Cline, 2023). Teachers leaving is not just a trend in Virginia, however. Annually, over 44% of teachers leave the education field within the first five years of their teaching career (Gomez, 2023). That's nearly 50% of all brand new teachers. What does this have to do with students being proficient in English Language Arts though?

With the lack of licensed educators in the field, there are new challenges that they are facing that are adding to the impact of student proficiency in English Language Arts. The quality of experienced educators is declining by the experienced teachers retiring and licensed teachers leaving the field. Provisionally licensed teachers are now rising in popularity in some schools, whom of which are lacking the experience and quality of instructional practice. "Provisional licenses are short-term, nonrenewable licenses (Cline, 2023). The state would grant that teacher a provisional license if they have not yet met all of the state requirements to teach (Cline, 2023). If the teachers are not experienced enough in certain instructional areas or have a difficult time managing a class, that is going to greatly impact the quality of education that students are receiving. This is potentially adding to the proficiency of students in reading. If the teacher has not had proper training and does not understand the science of reading, this could be contributing

to the decline. By understanding the science of reading, the teacher has a better understanding of how to teach reading and how kids learn to read.

In addition to that, schools are also having to place more students in a class due to the lack of educators (St. George, 2023). “More than 1 in 4 of the nation’s public schools coped with teacher and staff shortages by creating larger classes” (St. George, 2023). Aside from larger classes, teachers are having to give up their planning time to cover additional classes because there are not enough full time working teachers to work a class (Flannery, 2023). With larger class sizes and increased student negative behaviors, there may be an unbalanced learning environment. Disruption in instruction can cause students to have a hard time focusing and staying on task. Having larger class sizes also limits the opportunities for students who may need special services. “Students of color, students with disabilities, students from low-income families, and students from rural communities need and deserve exceptional education opportunities to help them overcome the challenges they are facing. However, these students are more likely to be in districts and schools with fewer resources and more severe teacher shortages” (Elevate K-12, 2022). By placing these students, including all students, into schools and classrooms with larger numbers, teachers and students are also going to have a challenge with building relationships. Teacher-student relationships are extremely important in the classroom because it makes the student feel more welcomed and supported. With larger class sizes, most teachers will need to spend even more time getting to know their students and build

trust and respect with them. In certain situations, this may be nearly impossible for students and teachers to connect (Elevate K-12, 2022).

A study was done on students in two different schools in Spain, where students were in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade. This study was taken over two years to measure the difference in learning on class sizes. These years were chosen for the researcher, Pedro Gallardo, due to these years being the final years of elementary learning and student grades are more comparable at this age (Carro & Gallardo, 2023). When looking at student class size data, School 1 had 82 students in grade 5 and 49 students in grade 6 for the first year of the study. For this first year, grade 5 was split into three classes and grade 6 was split into two classes. For the second year of the study, the 82 students from grade 5 were then split into five classes instead of three. The 49 students from grade 6 were then split into three classes. Students were surveyed before, during, and after the study to determine if class size really did impact their learning (Carro & Gallardo, 2023). This same process was also conducted at a second school, School 2, to help back data. School 2 had 50 students in grade 5 for the first year of the study, and the students were split into two classes. For the second year, the students were split into three classes. This same split up was for the grade 6 students, whom of which had 60 students in the grade level (Carro & Gallardo, 2023).

By the end of the two year research study, “In all estimates, an overall positive and significant average effect is found in the reduction of class size” (Gallardo, 2023). All subjects across the board showed significant improvement in academic success among the students. With



creating these smaller class sizes, schools are going to need to hire more teachers, which is not something that is feasible for all schools across the nation.

When thinking about my own English classroom over the last few years, it has been much more difficult to work with students on writing skills when the class sizes are larger. When I had a class of 26 students trying to write an essay, it was much more of a challenge to meet one-on-one with students to discuss their writing skills and give specific input than it is to meet one-on-one and work with students in a class size of 14 that I currently have this academic school year.

Due to the shortage of teachers across the country, with “86% of public schools struggling to hire educators,” (Teachers of Tomorrow, 2024), schools are hiring more underqualified teachers than qualified teachers.

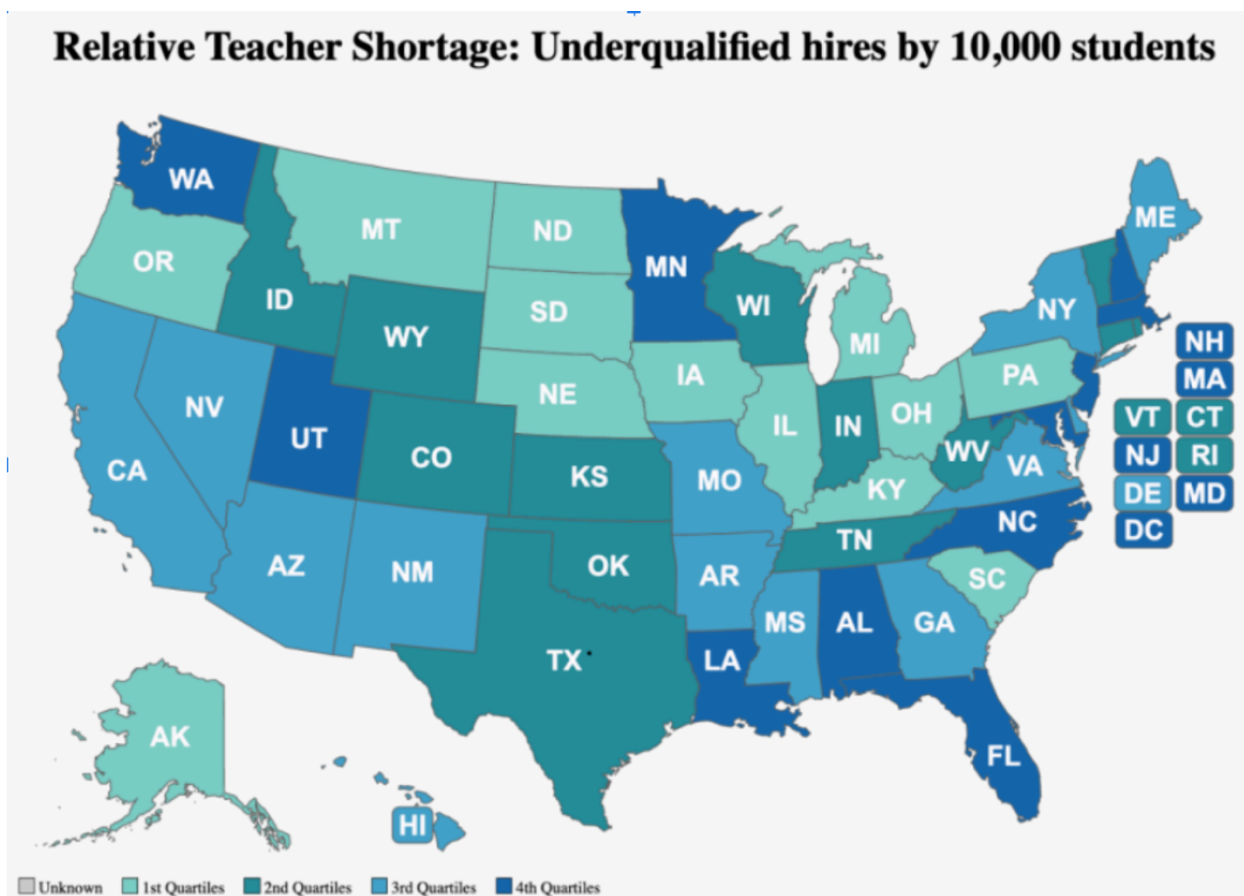


Figure 6: A map of states having to hire underqualified teachers (Teachers of Tomorrow, 2024).

States that are in the 1<sup>st</sup> Quartile have the least number of underqualified teachers in their schools. States that are considered 4<sup>th</sup> Quartile have the greatest number of underqualified teachers that were hired. Out of the states in the 4<sup>th</sup> Quartile: Washington State, Utah, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, Washington D.C., North Carolina, Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana, Florida has the highest number of vacancies with over 5,000 (Teachers of Tomorrow, 2024). “Teachers are not encouraging other people to become teachers because they know how bad it is” (Teachers of Tomorrow, 2024).

In order to help the teacher shortage, Culpeper County Public Schools is going to start a dual enrollment program for the 2024-2025 school year. It is going to be called Future Educators Academy (FEA), and has a mission of to “provide accessible, supportive, and innovative learning experiences that empower high school students to embark on an accelerated, high-quality teacher education and licensure pathway” (CCPS School News Team, 2023). The goal is to allow high school students access to college education classes so that the process in becoming an educator may be fast-tracked.

## **2.5 Chronic Absenteeism**

Chronic Absenteeism is defined as “miss[ing] at least 15 days of school in a year” (Department of Education, n.d.). Student rates for becoming chronically absent have risen since COVID-19. Data has shown that due to students being absent more often, this is a major factor in declining test scores (The White House, 2023). Students that do not regularly attend school are going to struggle with learning and retaining the required content that they need to know.

When it comes time to measuring student success, performance rates are going to be lower for those students who do not attend school. Looking past test scores, lack in attendance can also lead to a higher high school drop-out rate among students across the country. (The White House, 2023).

The United States of America Department of Education website provides an interactive map of the percentage of students who were chronically absent during the 2015-2016 school year. Based on that data from the map, Culpeper County Public Schools in Culpeper, Virginia had 15.7% of students that were chronically absent during the 2015-2016 academic year (Department of Education, 2024). During that year the county had a total of 7,991 students enrolled in their K-12 buildings. 15.7% of their enrolled students brings their total of chronic absenteeism in 2015-2016 to 1,255 students.

When looking at the school year before COVID-19, the 2018-2019 year, Culpeper Middle School (CMS) had a total of 1,095 students, and 9.68% of those students were chronically absent (VDOE, 2024). Data was not collected for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years due to the pandemic. During the 2021-2022 school year, the rates skyrocketed to 30.6% of the 1,111 students being chronically absent (VDOE, 2024). This same year, based on Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) website, was when standardized test scores in English proficiency began to drop below the state average. Based on the chart shown in Figure 2 in the introduction, CMS scored a 74, when 75 was the state passing rate. The following year, in

2023, the score declined even more to a 70. Chronic absenteeism may be a factor in one of the reasons as to why English proficiency has dropped in this school.

Now that the pandemic is a few years behind us, there are many more factors to look at in a school setting as to why literacy rates are declining. To look more closely at the factors that have contributed to the decline of reading proficiency specifically at Culpeper Middle School, I completed a case study where I interviewed teachers and staff, looked at student data, and looked into rules that the school has on attendance and technology in the classroom.

### Chapter 3: Case Study on Culpeper Middle School

To look specifically at a school that has experienced the decline in proficiency, I completed a study on Culpeper Middle School that is located in Culpeper, Virginia. Many of the individuals that were interviewed for this thesis do teach in Culpeper, and have experienced the factors of the decline in literacy in their everyday teaching experience.

Culpeper Middle School is one of two middle schools located in Culpeper County, Virginia. The school ranges in grades sixth through eighth, and has over 1,100 students enrolled. Nearly 50% of students are white, while 29% are Hispanic/ Latino, 12% are African American, and 9% are Asian, Pacific Islander, and or another race (U.S. News, 2024). 100% of the students also receive free and reduced lunch throughout Culpeper Middle School.

As an English teacher at Culpeper Middle School, I have taught a variety of different levels of sixth grade English courses including general education, honors, English language learner clusters, and a collaborative class. A collaborative class has a general education teacher and a special education teacher co-teaching together. The students in the class are special education students and general education students. Out of the three years I have taught at CMS, I have taught two different English language learner cluster classes. During both of those classes, I had an English Language learner co-teacher. I also currently have a special education co-teacher for my collaborative setting English class that I teach this year. The class sizes that I have taught have also ranged from 14 students to 26 students in a class.

With there being an increase of English language learner students moving into the area, the population of them at the school definitely has an influence on the reading literacy rate. For students who are not familiar with the language and do not speak it regularly, they cannot read it either. When English language learner students do enroll in the school, but are a newcomer to the country, meaning they have been in the United States for less than a year, they are still required to partake in all of the state assessments. This means that their scores do contribute to the literacy scores that show a declining rate. While this is not a major factor, it does count for some of the decline in reading proficiency.

2023-2024 School Year

### Reading Performance: All Students

English Reading	▼	UPDATE CHART
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Figure 7: An updated chart for the 2023-2024 school year compared to the last two years (VDOE, n.d.).

After testing has been completed and data has been recorded from the 2023- 2024 school year, Figure 6 above shows what the Culpeper Middle School Standards of Learning (SOL) assessment scored compared to the division and state that the school is located in. For this most recent academic year, the scores continue to decline for Culpeper Middle School. All three years displayed on this chart show academic scores post COVID-19. Based on how many years students have been back in school full time, the students still continue to regress in their reading performance. The English Reading SOL chart in Figure 3 also averages in the Writing SOL that is taken from the eighth graders as well. When looking at the photo of the data below in Figure 8, a more specific breakdown of each subject is shown, which actually shows that without the Writing SOL being averaged in, the English Reading SOL scores improved.

SOL Tests	2022-2023 School Year	2023-2024 School Year
Reading	69.74%	75.96%
Writing	50%	X
Math	73.3%	74.95%

Science	63.28%	63.19%
Civics	71%	66.7%

Figure 8: SOL Data from the 2023-2024 school year based on percentage passed at Culpeper Middle School (K. Shackleton, personal communication, July 29, 2024).

Without taking the eighth grade Writing SOL into consideration with the test scores, the passing rate for English Reading SOL alone has improved during the most recent academic school year. The English Reading SOL rate increased from a 69.74% passing rate to a 75.96% passing rate among the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. This is most likely due to the Virginia Literacy Act that was passed in 2022.

### 3.1 Virginia Literacy Act

The Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) was passed in 2022, which is a plan to help improve the literacy in Virginia among its students. “Through the VLA, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) will support school divisions through a multi-year effort with tools, resources, technical assistance and funding” (VDOE, n.d.). The act officially takes place throughout Virginia starting in the 2024-2025 school year for secondary schools. Elementary schools had to start their VLA plan for this academic year. The main points of the Virginia Literacy Act, that can be found on the Virginia Department of Education website include: Kindergarten through grade 5 students will receive scientifically based reading and evidenced based literacy instruction, kindergarten through grade 8 students will receive “evidence-based

supplemental instruction and intervention” (VDOE, n.d.), families will be able to access resources for reading and literacy development at home, teachers will use evidence-based curriculum that assesses the student appropriately, reading specialists will oversee intervention, and every division will have a literacy plan to support needs (VDOE, n.d.). The science of reading concept comes into play with the Virginia Literacy Act through schools providing the scientifically based reading materials in the instruction. “All reading and supplemental reading materials must provide students with strategies to learn to decode the words and passages,” said Mrs. Burke. “There is no specific way to teach it, but it must follow the strategies,” she added. (M. Burke, personal communication, September 18, 2024). Each teacher has their own teaching style, so figuring out how the teacher wants to integrate the strategies into student learning is up to the teacher.

According to the Virginia Literacy Act, in order to provide high quality instructional materials, there are three important factors that must be taken into consideration when giving materials to students. The first is knowledge and vocabulary. Reading instruction should following the pattern of always incorporating vocabulary to expand student knowledge. “Trying to incorporate intentional vocabulary is a must, but also focusing on incidental vocabulary and getting students to figure out the word by context clues is just as important, if not more,” (M. Burke, personal communication, September 18, 2024). Vocabulary is a major focus in the classroom this year at Culpeper Middle School, and students encounter new incidental words that they must break down each week. Incidental words are new words for the students that become vocabulary words as they show up in the texts. The second factor in providing high



quality instructional material is making sure that all instruction is meaningful and focused.

Students should be critically thinking and working on expanding upon their knowledge with each skill learned (VDOE, n.d.). The last factor, which has been stressed in Culpeper Middle School, is text complexity. Students should only be focused on grade-level text that is enhancing their thinking for whatever grade they are currently in (VDOE, n.d.).

Culpeper County Public Schools has hired a Director of K-12 Literacy in order to promote literacy among all grade levels within the county (CCPS School News Team, 2024). The goal of this position is to help promote literacy success among all grades, Kindergarten through twelfth grade. The addition of the Director of K-12 Literacy position also aligns with the Virginia Literacy Act stating that every division needs a plan, evidence-based literacy curriculum, intervention support based on need, and professional development to provide teachers and staff with the correct teaching materials.

As for Culpeper Middle School, the school has created a plan to integrate more reading and writing into all of the core subjects in addition to English: math, science, and history. This is known as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). Writing Across the Curriculum began in the 1980s, but is strictly becoming more and more popular in curriculum in schools across the nation for all levels of learning. The idea of WAC is that writing should be happening by the student in all subject areas, regardless of what the student is learning (Purdue, n.d.). For math at CMS, there are more high-level thinking word problems and projects being integrated into the curriculum that will allow students to expand upon their reading and writing skills. Students will

also be practicing explaining and describing the problem-solving process in order to justify what their answer and thinking process was. For history and science, there are more writing activities incorporated into the projects and writing prompts on assessments. By having students read and respond to more prompts that deal with scientific writing and historical texts, they are practicing their critical thinking with perspective skills. Students are also required to focus on grammar skills in their writing (VDOE, 2022), which is something that was originally only focused on during their English core classes.

All content area teachers are to reinforce the skills that English teachers are teaching. While other content teachers are not specifically teaching the English skills, they are to push students to critically think, communicate, and write with the same skills that they are expected to in their English classes. Some of the strategies that are commonly used across the curriculum include: taking notes, brainstorming, asking critical questions, and having students summarize through prompts (Hampton, 2024). In alignment with the Virginia Literacy Act, more schools in Virginia will see more writing across the curriculum strategies being implemented into their instruction. This is important for bringing literacy rates up because students need to continue their practice of writing and critical thinking in order to help get better at it.

There has been some pushback from teachers who do not teach the English subject. Since some of the courses had to rework their curriculum to fit more reading and writing activities into it; some of the teachers question to why they need to teach reading and writing if that is not their course to teach. “I teach middle school science that is only a semester long course. I am already

on a time crunch to get through the required science materials. Now we have to allot more time for students to do more reading and writing projects,” said Mr. Conley. “Literacy and writing definitely does need to improve, and it does need to be worked into every subject, but it makes things very difficult to work in to our curriculum,” he added, (C. Conley, personal communication, September 20, 2024). As a teacher that does only teach a semester long course, it can be difficult as you are on a time crunch. However, even though that English courses are year-long courses, English has a Standards of Learning test at the end of the year. Therefore, English is on just as much of a time crunch as they are trying to improve literacy scores.

*The implementation of English across the curriculum: An exploratory study of how South African educators teach writing in History lessons*, was conducted by Nhlanhla Mpofu that determined that with scaffolding vocabulary and writing, other content area teachers can easily incorporate Writing Across the Curriculum into their classes. In my own classroom when students are reading weekly stories from the textbook, novels, and or educational, high quality instructional articles, I make sure to point out the incidental vocabulary to students as they learn to expand their own vocabulary. Students practice using the context clues on their own to identify and define new words, similarly to the study by Mpofu. “If we can build a student’s vocabulary by repeatedly practicing defining incidental vocabulary words then these students will become stronger readers over time. You should also see this become evident in their writing as they practice, (M. Burke, personal communication, September 18, 2024). Since there has been a larger push for focusing on incidental vocabulary as part of the Virginia Literacy Act and

high quality materials for students, the growth of student success should progress throughout the school year. Besides reading and writing skills improving if writing is used across the curriculum, but communication skills are also improved upon by students (Flores-Ferres, van Weijen, Osorio-Olave, Palacios- Bianchi, & Rijlaarsdam, 2023). Students are also more engaged in what they are doing as they will have to think critically and recall back to the information that they learned. “Writing about a topic also encourages students to process information at a deeper level” (Terada, 2021). Even if students are just taking notes, they are still writing down the material that will at least be familiar to them at a later date when they go back to that information.

There are also many steps that educators can take in order to incorporate writing activities easily into the lessons that they are teaching. The book, *Programs and Practices: Writing Across the Secondary School Curriculum*, goes into detail about how small, slight changes can consistently reinforce writing across the curriculum. One idea of an activity to get students writing easily is to have students write down any questions that they have from the previous day before the class starts. This can get them to think back on prior knowledge that was taught, but also get them writing (Farrell-Childers, Ruggles Gere, & Young, 1994). Another example, especially for a project, is to show students an example of the final product first. Without giving them any directions or procedures, have students list what they think needs to be done and in what order (Farrell-Childers, Ruggles Gere, & Young, 1994). Since Culpeper Middle School is working on integrating more reading and writing projects across the curriculum, this would be an easy start for other courses to integrate writing as the students are also thinking about what they

have to do. “I am going to try this with the next project that we do in class,” Mr. Conley said. “If I give the kids an example of the final product and ask them to critically think and brainstorm the steps of how to get to the end of the project, I’ll be more writing and critical thinking skills immediately,” (C. Conley, personal communication, September 20, 2024).

For the English teachers in Culpeper County, there are Canvas courses on the Science of Reading. This is a requirement from the Virginia Literacy Act, but English teachers are the first teachers to take the course. According to an article posted by the Northwest Evaluation Association of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, NWEA, “The Science of reading is the converging evidence of what matters and what works in literacy instruction, organized around models that describe how and why” (Jiban, 2024). To help students gain more knowledge in their reading comprehension, there is a formula that can be followed:

$RC \text{ (reading comprehension)} = D \text{ (decoding)} \times LC \text{ (language comprehension)}$  (Jiban, 2024). In order for students to show growth in their reading comprehension, the students need to be able to decode and understand language, which has been the struggle. When students are learning to read, it is important that they are taught phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, fluency, vocabulary and oral language comprehension, and text comprehension. With all of these factors into consideration, teachers who have a stronger understanding of implementation should see growth in their students.

With students having integrated reading and writing across the curriculum, their retention and critical thinking skills should improve as it is implemented (NEUHAUS, 2024). The

teachers at Culpeper Middle School have all worked closely with their departments in order to best integrate more reading and writing strategies throughout their classes each day. “The math department has developed quarterly projects that help promote students having to explain their reasoning and describe math concepts. Students must be able to justify their work by using the writing skills that they have” (N. Miller, personal communication, September 6, 2024). With students now being required to use their reading and writing skills across the curriculum through the Virginia Literacy Act, there should be an improvement over time of academic reading achievement. “All materials are mandated by the state. Right now it is in place for elementary schools, secondary schools are working it in this year, but will officially have to follow the act in place for next school year,” said Mrs. Burke. “Part of my job and the literacy director’s job for the school I work at is to make sure all reading material is following the state mandate. This even includes all supplemental work and any intervention for tier 3 students,” she added, (M. Burke, personal communication, September 18, 2024). With schools having extra support for teachers to help collect and monitor materials through the reading specialists and literacy directors, the load for teachers should not be as much as it was in the past.

Teachers are also looking more closely at Lexile Levels when giving instruction and assignments in their classroom. “A Lexile measure is a valuable tool for teachers, parents, and students. It serves two unique functions: it is the measure of how difficult a text is OR a student’s reading ability level” (Doman, n.d.). The highest level that can be taken is a 2000L. The L after the score just indicates that it is a 2000 Lexile (Doman, n.d.). Prior to this school year, the 2023-2024 school year, there were teachers that were not focusing on Lexile Levels in

the classroom material, which led students to not reading and performing at the appropriate level. When students are reading material where the Lexile Level is too low for their grade level, they are not going to be performing as well as they should on the Standards of Learning (SOL) test at the end of the year since the material does not properly follow the state standards. If a teacher assigned a reading piece where the Lexile Level is too high, then the students are no able to read and comprehend the passages, leading to lower performance rates as well. The inserted chart below in Figure 9 shows the Lexile Levels for each grade level at the middle school level.

Grade	50 <sup>th</sup> Percentile	90 <sup>th</sup> Percentile
6	1030L	1340L
7	1095L	1410L
8	1155L	1470L

Figure 9: Lexile Levels for grades 6-8 in the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile and the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile (Lexile, 2024).

Based on the students that I have in my own classes this year, nearly 60% of my students are struggling with on-level reading to fit the sixth grade 50<sup>th</sup> percentile range. The lowest Lexile Level that is for the sixth grade used at Culpeper Middle Schools is 925L. When presenting my students with articles that are at the lowest sixth grade level, 925L, one out of my three classes

struggle to read and comprehend the passage. My students who are in my collaborative class need more reading support, so my co-teacher and I really have to break down the passages for the students. When explaining grade level appropriate material to my students, it can be really surprising to listen to what they think the story actually means. They struggle with comprehension and having to recall back to the text for pulling information out to answer the questions.

Teachers are required to teach on-level material to their students, but this can be difficult if the students are not actually on grade level. Based on a diagnostic test that the students had taken at the beginning of the school year in the fall, the majority of my students did not score at the sixth grade level. Most of my students scored between a second and fourth grade level, which aligns with the points made that literacy is declining across the United States. With the Virginia Literacy Act in place and the plan that Culpeper Middle School has in place, the school should hopefully see an improvement in reading in the upcoming years.

**In TNTP's study, *The Opportunity Myth*, researchers looked at the impact of receiving greater access to standards-aligned grade-level work.**

Students who received more grade-level assignments made 1.7 months of additional learning gains compared to their peers who did not.

**1.7**  
months

But the gains were even greater for the lowest performing students in the study. Compared to similarly low performing students with less access to grade-level work, these students made 7.3 months of additional learning gains.

**7.3**  
months



Figure 10: The impact of students receiving appropriate grade-level work (VDOE, 2024).

Figure 10 comes directly from the Virginia Literacy Act Implementation Playbook, which explains the evidence that the act will lead to growth among students in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Other forms of evidence explained in the playbook include: curricular improvements add to the equivalent of twenty-five to fifty additional days of learning, and struggling readers making sufficient growth when paired with proficient readers to grade-level material, top-quartile texts promoting student achievement by 3.6 points (VDOE, 2024). “Schools in Virginia have the opportunity to grow sufficiently academically right now with the Virginia Literacy Act. I am so excited to see where this takes us not only as a state, but also to see the individual growth for the students that I work with at my specific school,” stated Mrs. Burke. As a reading specialist, Mrs. Burke explained the importance of Scarborough’s Rope, which is inserted below. “Scarborough’s Rope aligns directly with the Science of Reading mathematical equation ( $D \times LC = RC$ : Decoding  $\times$  Language Comprehension = Reading Comprehension). While that mathematical equation is great, Scarborough’s Rope breaks it down even further so you can visually see how everything ties together,” (M. Burke, personal communication, September 18, 2024). All of the skills broken down on Scarborough’s Rope in Figure 11 are all taught and practiced in the English classroom at Culpeper Middle School. With the other courses reinforcing reading and writing, students will use the skills learned from this strategy to expand upon their knowledge in other content areas.

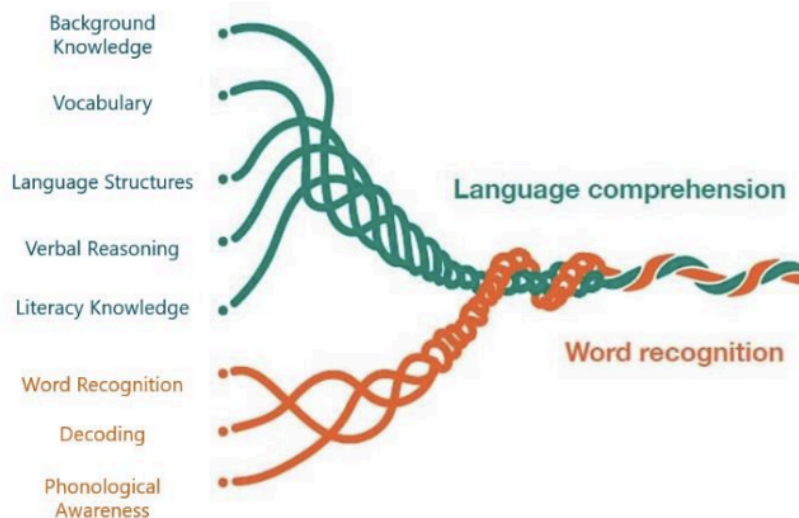


Figure 11: Scarborough's Rope (VDOE, n.d.).

After asking Mrs. Burke, the reading specialist, about what has changed in reading over the last few decades, she explained that teaching has not changed, but everything involved has changed, (M. Burke, personal communication, September 18, 2024). “When you look at the ‘pre-factors’ of what was going on before the decline in literacy scores, you will see that teachers have had to adapt to everything going on in the world,” she said. “Teachers have to adapt to the change in materials and curriculum to keep up with whatever the students are needing to learn for that period of time. As the years have gone on, you will notice that there has also been a lack of parent engagement and discipline. That is why what had worked for schools in the past is not working for us now,” (M. Burke, personal communication, September 18, 2024). With the lack of parent engagement at home, students are not reading as much as they used to. This has now caught up to the effectiveness of what the materials used to be and what they are now in schools.

When asked about how society has impacted the learning and teaching in the classroom, Mrs. McCallister had a lot of input. “I have been teaching for over thirty years. It is very true that the parent involvement is nowhere near where it used to be,” she said. She also went on to explain that without the parent involvement at home, especially with reading, the students do not progress in school as fast, which makes extra work for the teacher trying to catch them up to the level of materials that are in the schools. “Now that students are not at the reading levels that they used to be our curriculum always evolves to best fit them,” (H. McCallister, personal communication, September 16, 2024). Mrs. McCallister also explained that her role is not just teacher anymore either, it’s nurse, parent, therapist, etc.. “I love teaching when I can teach. That is why I am still here doing this job. I stick to what has worked for me for over thirty years, and I will continue to do so. While the curriculum changing and evolving is frustrating and tedious, it is for the best interest in what kids need at the time. I hope that parents are starting to realize this and will become more involved in their child’s education in a positive way again” (H. McCallister, personal communication, September 16, 2024).

For the 2025-2026 school year, part of the Virginia Literacy Act is to also implement ALL in Tutoring. When mentioned previously, the tutoring had no structure to it at all and it was not found to be very beneficial for the students to show significant growth. The updated program is to serve students who are both “at risk” and “not proficient” in reading and or math based on the assessments given. The duration of the tutoring is 18 weeks for students who are “at risk”, and 36 weeks for students who are “not proficient”. Students would be grouped into different

teacher's classes in Culpeper Middle School for the remediation. For the next academic year, CMS will be adding an additional block into the schedule that is solely for remediation set in place by Virginia. The school does not know what specific days this will be for or what teachers will be remediating in what yet. Since this will be a school wide implementation, teachers that do not teach reading or math are also going to have to teach a remediation block for one of the two subjects. "I believe that science is going to be remediating in reading because we have had Professional Development presentations on how to teach reading recently," Mr. Conley explained. "I am still learning more of the science of reading materials as we go. This is very new to me," (C. Conley, personal communication, September 20, 2024). Before the tutoring starts next school year, teachers will be given appropriate, grade level materials for the students that will be in their tutoring group by the state. This should help teachers complete the remediation as materials and the framework of the process will be provided.

### **3.2 Technology in the Learning Environment**

At Culpeper Middle School, students have access to their own school-issued Chromebook. "Giving each student a Chromebook definitely has had its pros and cons. Having one to one technology devices has been helpful when it comes to independent work, interactive comprehension breakout rooms, and if I need to take a day off last minute. I can easily provide the materials to my students via Google Classroom" (N. Miller, personal communication, September 10, 2024). Ms. Miller enjoys having the Chromebooks available for students to keep a balance of using technology in the classroom. However, there are times where she has seen how the technology interferes with student learning. Ms. Miller explained that online review

games such as Gimkit and or Blooket, which is very similar to Gimkit, have ruined reviewing in the classroom. “Students only want to play the computer game for the game portion of the review. They randomly select answers, hoping they get them correct to get more points” (N. Miller, personal communication, September 10, 2024). After experiencing students getting frustrated over Gimkits and Blookets, Ms. Miller solely does technology free review games now for her lessons.

As of January 1, 2025, schools in the Commonwealth of Virginia need to have a plan in place for following the new Cell Phone- Free Education law. Culpeper Middle School’s plan of action is to implement magnetic pouches for their students to place their personal electronic devices in during the school day from the company, Yondr. “The constant presence- buzzing, pinging, and distracting- takes away from what you are doing, and who you are doing it with. Yondr’s mission is simple: alleviate the intrusion of personal technology to create vital, distraction- free experiences that enrich people’s lives” (Yondr, n.d.). With cell phones being a huge distraction in schools, Yondr’s magnetic pouches should help eliminate this with their product. When students first arrive to school in the morning, each student will place their cell phone and smart watch, if they have one, into the Yondr pouch. Once the devices are in the pouch, the pouch will lock magnetically. Students will not have access to their devices again until the end of the day. Culpeper Middle School is unsure of how they are going to set up their unlocking stations yet at this time. Options include either having portable unlocking stations that will travel from class to class, or having set bases that students will have to go to on their way

out of the building. “I am excited for this new cell phone policy,” Ms. Miller stated. “Cell phones have been a major distraction because the students are addicted to them anytime they go off or get a notification. I have students that set their phone to the flashlight that goes off every time they get a text. When I have students turn in their cell phones at the beginning of class and they do not turn them off, the flashlight continuously goes off. It ends up just drawing more attention than letting the student keep the phone” (N. Miller, personal communication, September 10, 2024). When the students were told about the Governor’s order for a phone free learning environment, the students were not happy about it. The main concern was parent communication during the day. While this can be a valid concern for if there was an emergency, the solution is that parents will have to call the office.

### 3.3 Absenteeism

Culpeper Middle School is ranked in the yellow zone (level two) when it comes to absenteeism still (See Figure 12). This means that there are still several students that are missing school on a regular basis.

Levels	Performance Indicators Evaluated
Level One	School is performing at or above the state standard for the indicator.
Level Two	School is performing near the state standard for the indicator or improving.
Level 3	School is performing below the state standard for the indicator.

Figure 12: Level description of how school quality is ranked among absenteeism (VDOE, 2024).

The Commonwealth of Virginia law states that "...every parent, guardian, or other person in the Commonwealth, having control or charge of any child who will have reached the fifth birthday on or before September 30 of any school year and who has not passed the eighteenth birthday shall, during the period of each year the public schools are in session and for the same number of days and hours per day as the public schools, cause such child to attend..." (VDOE, n.d.). Students shall only be exempted from school by religious training or belief, observing religious holidays, juvenile and domestic relations through court, career guidance counseling, technical school attendance, and early graduation (VDOE, n.d.). Attendance rules may differ for students who are currently experiencing contagious or infectious diseases and immunization proof has not been provided.

According to the VDOE website, "Based on a 180-day school year, that means approximately 18 days per year or 2 to 3 days per month" is defined as chronic absenteeism (VDOE, n.d.). With students missing far more than 2 to 3 days a month, chronic absenteeism is not difficult to have for some. According to the Culpeper Middle School Parent Student Handbook, Chronic absenteeism is when "a student is absent from school attendance or a class(es), regardless of the reason for ten percent (10%) or more of the days on roll" (CMS, n.d.). Students at CMS are allowed ten parent calls for an excused absence. "Upon the tenth absence that is excused by the parent without third party documentation (doctor, dentist, therapist, funeral director, etc.), a documented reasonable effort of personal contact by the principal or designee, either by telephone, email, postal mail, school conference, or home visit, will be made" (CMS, n.d.).

Being absent from school specifically means that a student is not at school for the entire school day and does not participate in a school sponsored off-campus activity. The breakdown of absences include: an excused absence, an unexcused absence, and partial day absences. An excused absence requires the parent to contact the school and provide the reasoning for their student to not be in attendance. Following the call, formal documentation must come to school to be presented to the office. For example, a doctor's note proving that the student was sick and was at the doctor instead of school. "Excused absences include: student illness, death or serious illness of a family member; doctor, dentist, or therapist appointments; pre-approved travel for family emergencies or vacation; college visitations, subpoenas for court; religious observances; participation in a civic event; out of school suspensions (CMS, n.d.). If a student brings in documentation proving any of the previously listed excuses, their absence will be counted as excused. An unexcused absence refers to an absence where the parent or guardian has not made contact with the school for a reasoning. "Unexcused absences include, but are not limited to the following: oversleeping; tiredness; hair care appointments; shopping; recreational activities; child care issues; missed school buses; personal transportation problems; bus suspension (CMS, n.d.). Again, students are allowed ten unexcused absence per school year. Lastly, a partial day absence includes where a student is not at school for part of the day. "Students may also be subject to disciplinary action for unexcused partial day absences as determined by the principal (CMS, n.d.). All of the indicators here all tie into the chart in Figure 12. Depending on how many families follow the attendance requirements and what the ratio is of students in the school, depends on what level the school scores at for attendance in the Commonwealth of Virginia.



“Absenteeism has for sure improved among the students that I see. There are still a handful of them that seem to be absent all of the time though. When those students do show up to school, they have no interest in being here or seem to wonder about what they missed in their classes” (N. Miller, personal communication, September 10, 2024). Ms. Miller posts all of her work on Google Classroom so that the materials that the students are learning are easily accessible at home. This is helpful for students who are reviewing at home, but especially helpful for the students that are absent and want to catch up on the work that they missed so they are not behind when they return to school. “I do have students who view the materials at home, but you cannot make a student do work at home to catch up. When a student returns to school, you can tell who has looked at the material at home and who has not” (N. Miller, personal communication, September 10, 2024). The students that are absent frequently do show a decline in progress with their academic grades. While it is difficult to catch these students up during the school day, Ms. Miller does offer remediation after school for an hour. “I give the parents an option for their student to stay after school for an hour to work on missing work or just extra practice with me” (N. Miller, personal communication, September 10, 2024). While this does not improve the absenteeism of the students, it does help the students that may be chronically absent catch up with their school work if they chose to take Ms. Miller up on her offer.

Culpeper Middle School did start a new attendance incentive activity during the 2023-2024 school year to try and promote good attendance among students. Each week one of the guidance counselors will randomly select one student from 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade to be a “Star Attendance Award Winner.” These three students must have had perfect attendance for that

given week with no tardies to school. Each Friday during the school's morning news broadcast, the counselor announces who the three lucky students are that won. Those students then report to the cafeteria to claim a prize. The prize is typically some sort of snack or cookie pass for lunch. "I love the idea of trying to incentivize perfect attendance for the week," Ms. Miller stated. "However, I do not think that it is enough for the students. They love snacks, but I do not think it is enough for the ones that are chronically absent" (N. Miller, personal communication, September 10, 2024). The Star Attendance program is only brought up to students during the broadcast on Fridays. My suggestion to help boost this would be to continuously mention it on the morning news throughout the week.

The Virginia Department of Education actually did a study from the 2023-2024 school year on attendance. As a whole state, 16.1% of the students who are in school are chronically absent (Coons, 2024). The grade level that seems to have the most difficulty with absenteeism was surprisingly Kindergarten, with 19.1% of Kindergarteners across Virginia being chronically absent (Coons, 2024). To help teach families about the importance of attending school and why students should miss as little as they can, families were sent a flyer that is attached in the appendix in A.5 Attachment 1.

The flyer discusses why attendance is crucial in school for young children as they are building the foundation of their learning. "After reading the statistics on 'Why It Matters,' you can really see how attendance affects these kids as they get older. When they come to us in

middle school, it is clear if they are lacking the skills they should have learned in early elementary school,” stated Ms. Miller.

By providing families with data that supports who is affected by attendance and why it matters, hopefully families will try to get their students to school as often as possible. When presenting a problem, it is always beneficial to help present a solution as well. The attendance flyer does just that. Under ‘What We Can Do,’ on the flyer, there are solutions offered to parents that can be fixed on the Virginia schools side of absenteeism including: engaging families in learning, fixing transportation errors, addressing health needs of students that need help, and tracking the right data of students being absent (VDOE, 2024).

There was also an additional brochure that went home to every parent in Virginia who has a school aged student. The brochure is titled, “When I Miss School, My Opportunities Disappear...”. The brochure explains what younger students need in order to be most successful in school including: understanding the schools attendance policy, making sure the student has updated vaccines, helping the student find their class before school starts, getting students to bed early enough at night, trying to keep doctor’s appointments to after school, keeping vacations to the summertime, and only keeping the student home from school if they are extremely sick (VDOE, 2024). For older students, most of the points made in the brochure are the same, if not similar, but there are points on encouraging positive, appropriate behavior, getting them involved in sports and activities, and knowing the student’s friend group (VDOE, 2024). It is important for parents to understand what their student is missing out on if they are consistently absent from school. Not only does this affect the student now, but it can later in life as well.

Schools in Virginia have also partnered with NoKidHungry to help students receive breakfast. "... an additional 25,000 breakfasts were served to students last year," Dr. Coons stated in her Superintendent's Message from VDOE. Culpeper Middle School does offer breakfast to their students free of charge during homeroom time. "Most of the kids do go to get breakfast in the morning. I truly do hope that it does help the students that do not have food at home." (N. Miller, personal communication, September 10, 2024). By providing breakfast to all students at school, attendance may rise for some students as they may not have access to food at home.

Based on the case study of Culpeper Middle School, it is evident that there are many attributes to the declining of literacy scores among students. COVID-19, teacher shortages, chronic absenteeism, and technology are just a few factors that have played a major role. With the implementation of the Virginia Literacy Act starting at all secondary schools next year, CMS is hoping to bring up the literacy rate among the students.

By looking more closely at Culpeper Middle School and the data that the school has on reading assessment scores, how the school monitors technology, attendance, and student success, it is clear that the school has taken the proper steps to help try to increase reading proficiency among the students that attend. With the Virginia Literacy Act being implemented by next year, the curriculum will help support reading and writing across all content areas, not just English. This is a very positive change for CMS as they have already started seeing a slow change in student academic success this year.

## Chapter 4: Conclusions

After conducting research on the decline of literacy proficiency, and completing a case study on the specifics of Culpeper Middle School, it is clear that CMS and other schools across the nation are trying to bring up the proficiency. With COVID-19 being a large factor in the academic gaps, there were still other factors triggering the lack of proficiency post pandemic. Chronic absenteeism may have risen during the pandemic, but it was still an evident factor in the decline once schools returned back to their normal days as well. Technology is going to continue to advance, but schools, including Culpeper Middle School, are in the process of making a plan to help eliminate the distractions and the increased lack of work ethic that may come from technology devices. The last factor, teacher shortages, are also going to continue to be a problem if schools do not have a plan in place to best support their teacher's needs. However, after looking at the case study, it seems to be that teachers will have an easier time getting certified, which may help increase the interest of people wanting to become teachers. With these factors in

mind, overall, it is difficult to pinpoint one specific factor for the decline in reading proficiency. Each factor has their own specific contribution that add to the scores.

With the Virginia Literacy Act being in place, schools across the Commonwealth of Virginia either have a plan, or are incorporating a plan to promote more reading and writing. Elementary schools had to implement their plan for this school year, while secondary schools have a plan now, but do not have to have the whole act implemented until next school year. Culpeper Middle School, as a secondary school, has implemented most of the plan already for this year. This includes, as previously mentioned, having more reading and writing activities across the curriculum, a reading specialist onsite to help the intervention, and more on-level reading to specifically match the new state standards. Teachers at Culpeper Middle School will begin extra training this year, with a stipend, on the science of reading. This way, for next school year, the teachers will begin remediating students on reading during a set block of time.

Based on a case study from Eastern Oregon University, 94% of the participants felt that the extra learning for teachers on the science of reading has positively impacted their role as a teacher (eCampus, 2024). One of the local schools near Eastern Oregon University even saw immediate success in the classroom from a teacher that attended the literacy training that academic year. At the beginning of the year that teacher's second grade class was at a 36% for reading on level. By the end of the year, the growth jumped to 78% in reading proficiency (eCampus, 2024). By seeing the growth happen in other schools around the nation, Culpeper Middle School teachers should also experience this as they complete the training and implement the practice into the classroom.

In order to get students more excited about reading, one of my recommendations for teachers is to find high quality instructional material that fits the grade level that is going to get students interested in the material. For example, most of my students love the sport soccer. With my English language learners who come from other countries, soccer is a major sport for them. It is something that they are always playing in their free time. To get them more excited about reading, there is a novel that is on the approved book list for Culpeper Middle School titled, *Booked* by Kwame Alexander that I do a novel study on with my classes. *Booked* is about a middle school soccer player that is going through a hard time, but is able to overcome his challenges. The students find this book extremely relatable, which makes it easier for them to comprehend. Researchers have found that the topic that the students are reading on has a much bigger impact on comprehension (VDOE, 2024). This also has to do with the background knowledge that students have.

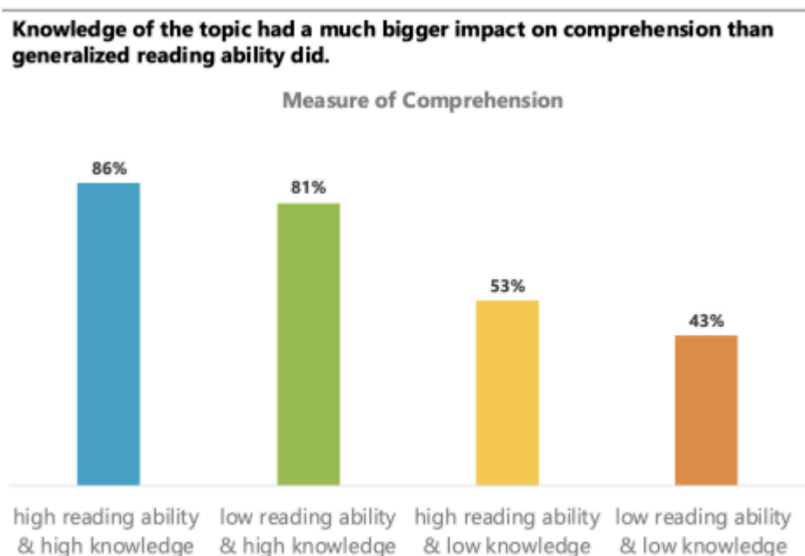


Figure 13: Background knowledge impact on comprehension (VDOE, 2024).

Based on the figure above, evidence shows that students perform higher if they have higher knowledge on the topic. This supports the claim I have of finding reading materials that students are interested in and students will see growth in their reading and comprehension.

The cellphone free education mandate is also a strong positive for Virginia Schools. This will help teachers in the classroom as they will not have to deal with students being distracted by their personal devices. Since there will be less distraction among students on their personal devices, the students can focus more on engagement and interaction among each other to help build healthier social skills.

With over 6.5 million students chronically absent nationwide (NASSP, 2024), academic performance declines, which can ultimately lead to students dropping out of school. After researching absenteeism and seeing it happen in my own school, there are several strategies that can be taken to help improve the overall attendance of students. For one, students that are chronically absent may just need a strong mentor in their life to help motivate them to get through the school day. Students that are chronically absent could be assigned a teacher that is not the student's own teacher, to build a relationship with and motivate the student to come to school. This is an idea that came about after Mrs. McCallister had previously done this with a few of the students at her school. The student felt as if they had an adult that they could trust and build a relationship that was not directly their teacher (H. McCallister, personal communication,



October 1, 2024). Another suggestion that I have is for the school to get to know their students that are chronically absent and try to find some club or activity that the student can get involved with. This may help the student make more friends or find a new interest that they are excited about exploring further.

In 2023 the governor of Virginia, along with the General Assembly dedicated 418 million dollars to help restore learning loss, literacy, and reduce the chronic absenteeism rate (VDOE, 2023). This was when the ALL in VA plan was created. More than half of the students in third through eighth grade were at risk for failing their reading SOL, and more than two-thirds of students in grades three through eight were at risk for failing their math SOL. The money went directly to schools across the Commonwealth to help with three plans that were developed: ALL in Tutoring, the Virginia Literacy Act, and Attendance Matters. As discussed throughout the thesis, Culpeper Middle School is starting to implement steps of the Virginia Literacy Act now, but will have full implementation of it for the 2025-2026 school year. ALL in Tutoring will be implemented during the next academic school year as well, but will be referred to as remediation at CMS.

ALL in Tutoring will be for every student that fits in the “at risk” or “not proficient” category for not passing the SOL in third through eighth grade. As per the ALL in Tutoring Playbook, eighteen weeks of tutoring is required for students in the “at risk” category and thirty-six weeks is required for students in the “not proficient” category. For students just entering third grade, students will be grouped by an assessment given in the fall. For students fourth through eighth grade, students will be grouped based on the previous year’s end of year

SOL test (VDOE, 2023). Schools in Virginia are also given the option of when they are going to provide the tutoring. School divisions are able to provide tutoring during the school day, before or after school, or implement a mixture of both options. The weekly requirement is five hours of tutoring that needs to be provided, so as long as the students are receiving the five hours, it is up to the school how they want to fit it in (VDOE, 2023). Training for the ALL in Tutoring will depend on who is doing the instruction. Teachers that do not already teach reading or math may need extra training to ensure that they will provide the most appropriate instruction. Through the Department of Education, there will be platforms to assist with tutoring that will begin in October of the academic year.

Another recovery plan that has been critical for the Commonwealth of Virginia's effort to restore education is the Bridging the Gap: Learning Loss Recovery Plan (VDOE, 2022). This plan was implemented in the fall of 2023 for all school divisions. The idea of this plan is to provide individualized student data reports so that parents are able to understand the data on their student. Culpeper Middle School has taken this plan seriously in order to help inform parents about their child's academic data and to help get parents more involved with their child's learning. Students take a growth assessment in the fall and in the winter to test their knowledge and measure growth. At the end of the year the students take the Standards of Learning assessment that is required by Virginia. Parents are given the individualized report on their student that shows what the student scored, what they did well on, and what they need help with. Reports are provided for the subjects that the student has a SOL in that academic year. At CMS,

students in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> all take the reading and math SOL, so they all get individualized reports on those two subjects. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, students also take the science, history, and writing SOL. Once the students are in eighth grade, the families will be provided with more individualized reports.

There are many steps that are actively being taken to help rise reading fluency among students across the United States. When looking at Virginia, specifically Culpeper Middle School, action is already been taken in hopes of seeing students become more proficient in reading. By eliminating the technological distractions, implementing the Virginia Literacy Act, and creating incentives and plans for chronic absenteeism, data should show that reading scores are increasing among the students.

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## Appendix

### A.1 Interview Questions

#### Student Engagement

1. How do you keep students interested in your instructional lessons?
2. What works best in *your* classroom for improving student engagement?
3. How do your student engagement techniques change from year to year?

#### Technology

1. Have you experienced AI usage by students in your classroom?
2. Do you use AI for planning purposes or to create materials?
3. What are your expectations for AI/ ChatGPT for your students?
4. How do you monitor if students are using AI on their assignments?
5. How have you seen technology evolve over your years of teaching?
6. Have you observed technology changing student learning and the student's cognitive thinking over the years that you have been a teacher?
7. Are you in favor of using technology for the majority of your teaching?
8. What does your balance look like of incorporating technology vs traditional teaching into your instruction?
9. How do you keep your students on task with what they are supposed to be doing when they have access to different websites on their Chromebook?
10. Do you use online review games such as Blooket or Gimkit in your classroom to engage students in review activities?

11. Do you find these online review games to be beneficial in helping students review the content?
12. Have cell phones been a big distraction for students in your classroom?
13. Are you looking forward to the new cell phone free education mandate that is going to start in the coming months for Virginia?
14. How do you think the students are going to react to this mandate?
15. Do you think parents will want to opt their child out of the cell phone ban in schools?

#### Virginia Literacy Act

1. Are you familiar with the Virginia Literacy Act?
2. Do you think this will help improve student's reading and writing proficiency in the future?
3. Are you familiar with the Virginia Literacy Act implementation plan for Culpeper Middle School?
4. How have other departments in the school, besides the English department, implemented reading and writing into their own curriculum?
5. Do you think that writing across the curriculum is a way to get students more excited about writing?
6. What is your department doing to include more writing into the content that you teach?
7. How do you feel about having to adjust your curriculum to add in reading and writing activities?
8. Have you noticed improvement in student literacy from last year?

9. If literacy rates were higher a few decades ago, why do we not just go back to the materials that were used then?
10. What is different about the materials we have today versus a few decades ago?
11. How have you noticed the change in curriculum affecting teachers?
12. What do you think has changed from a society standpoint that has made curriculum change over time?

### Chronic Absenteeism

1. Do the students in your class recognize that there are other students that may be chronically absent?
2. Have you noticed an increase or decrease in the number of students that have been chronically absent?
3. What is your method for catching up students in class on the content that they missed if they are chronically absent?
4. Do you think the Star Attendance program works to boost student attendance?
5. What are your thoughts on the attendance statistics from the Virginia attendance flyer?
6. Do you think that students take advantage of the free breakfast at school?

### A.2 Background on Interviewees

1. Ms. Miller has been a math teacher at Culpeper Middle School for four years. Before joining CMS, she was a teacher at another school where she worked with special education students in the classroom. Ms. Miller's smallest class that she has taught was 23 students, and her largest being 29 students.



2. Mrs. Richards is a current high school English teacher that has been teaching for 16 years. She started off her career teaching 2<sup>nd</sup> grade for two years, then moved to the middle school setting. She spent the next twelve years teaching middle school, where she taught both 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade English. This is now her second year at the high school level. Mrs. Richards smallest class that she has taught was 14 students, and her largest class was 32 students.
3. Mrs. Burke is a current reading specialist at a local school in Virginia. Mrs. Burke is a pseudonym for this professional as they wish to be kept anonymous. Before becoming a reading specialist, she was an elementary school teacher. She has worked with a variety of different grade levels and academic levels among students in the Kindergarten through twelfth grade setting. Her current role is to help out with a local Virginia school as part of the Virginia Literacy Act, “Every reading specialist, in consultation with classroom teachers, will coordinate and oversee intervention for students not meeting literacy benchmarks, and will develop and monitor student progress on student reading plans, working closely with families and teachers,” (VDOE, n.d.).
4. Mr. Conley is a middle school science teacher at a local school in Virginia. He grew up in Virginia and has experience in different schools around the Northern Virginia area. He has only taught science, but has taught at the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade level for students. He also has experience with teaching science as both a year-long course and a semester-long course.

5. Mrs. McCallister is an elementary teacher that has been teaching for over thirty years.

Before she was in the classroom that she is in now, she was as substitute for three years.

She has directly seen the impacts of all of the factors mentioned in this thesis:

COVID-19, chronic absenteeism, technology, and the teacher shortage. She has also worked with several different curriculums that have been implemented into her school over the years that she has taught.

### A.3 Acronyms

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| 1. CMS  | Culpeper Middle School                         |
| 2. HQIM | High Quality Instructional Materials           |
| 3. VLA  | Virginia Literacy Act                          |
| 4. SOL  | Standard of Learning (The Virginia Assessment) |
| 5. WAC  | Writing Across the Curriculum                  |

### A.4 Data for Culpeper Middle School

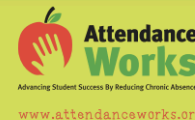
The data on the literacy scores and Standards of Learning Test results were accessed through the Virginia Department of Education site and through the testing coordinator for Culpeper Middle School. Scores were provided and were able to be accessed by every teacher in the building.

## A.5 Extra Attachments

# ATTENDANCE

## in the early grades

Many of our youngest students miss 10 percent of the school year—about 18 days a year or just two days every month. Chronic absenteeism in kindergarten, and even preK, can predict lower test scores, poor attendance and retention in later grades, especially if the problem persists for more than a year. Do you know how many young children are chronically absent in your school or community?



### Who Is Affected

Kindergarten and 1st grade classes often have absenteeism rates as high as those in high school. Many of these absences are excused, but they still add up to lost time in the classroom.

1 in 10 kids

in kindergarten and 1st grade are chronically absent. In some schools, it's as high as 1 in 4.<sup>1</sup>



2 in 10 low-income kids miss too much school. They're also more likely to suffer academically.<sup>3</sup>



2.5 in 10 homeless kids are chronically absent.<sup>2</sup>



4 in 10 transient kids miss too much school when families move.<sup>2</sup>

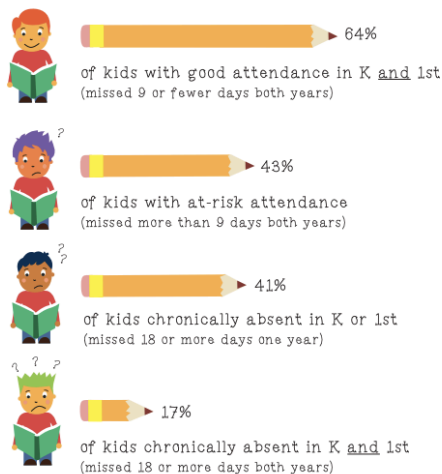


### Why It Matters

If children don't show up for school regularly, they miss out on fundamental reading and math skills and the chance to build a habit of good attendance that will carry them into college and careers.

Preliminary data from a California study found that children who were chronically absent in kindergarten and 1st grade were far less likely to read proficiently at the end of 3rd grade.

Who Can Read on Grade Level After 3rd Grade?<sup>3</sup>



### What We Can Do



#### Engage Families

Many parents and students don't realize how quickly early absences can add up to academic trouble. Community members and teachers can educate families and build a culture of attendance through early outreach, incentives and attention to data.



#### Fix Transportation

The lack of a reliable car, or simply missing the school bus, can mean some students don't make it to class. Schools, transit agencies and community partners can organize car pools, supply bus passes or find other ways to get kids to school.



#### Address Health Needs

Health concerns, particularly asthma and dental problems, are among the leading reasons students miss school in the early grades. Schools and medical professionals can work together to give children and families health care and advice.



#### Track the Right Data

Schools too often overlook chronic absence because they track average attendance or unexcused absences, not how many kids miss too many days for any reason. Attendance Works has free data-tracking tools.

These are a few steps that communities and schools can take. How do you think you can help?

<sup>1</sup> Chang, Hedy; Romero, Marijose, Present, *Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*, National Center for Children in Poverty: NY, NY, September 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Chronic Absence in Utah*, Utah Education Policy Center at the University of Utah, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> *Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Association with Student Characteristics, School Readiness and Third Grade Outcomes*, Applied Survey Research, May 2011.

Attachment 1: The importance of early attendance flyer that was sent to families in

Virginia (VDOE, 2024).

