



Early Childhood Assessments: Recent Trends in State Policies and Practices

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Matt Brunetti
Senior Program Associate
Assessment Research & Innovation

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policy perspectives

Kindergarten Readiness Assessments Help Identify Skill Gaps

Joanna L. Jensen, WestEd
Jessica Goldstein, Boulevard Research Partners LLC
Matthew A. Brunetti, WestEd

Researchers have long traced achievement gaps in the elementary years back to readiness gaps at the start of kindergarten (Duncan et al., 2007; Connor et al., 2011; Neuman & Dickinson, 2010). Educators seeking to address these gaps, which are associated with race and ethnicity, home language, disability status, and indicators of economic disadvantage (O'Donnell, 2008; Denton-Flanigan & McPhee, 2009), need systematic ways to identify which children need what kinds of support as they begin school. To help meet that need, over the past decade, states have developed a kindergarten readiness assessment (KRA) that schools and districts can use to evaluate how well prepared each child is to begin learning the state's academic standards across multiple domains.

Since 1965, the federal government has promoted equity for all students through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and its subsequent reauthorizations. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act connected assessment to equity, with new tests for students in third grade through high school designed to monitor achievement gaps between traditionally underserved students and their peers. When President Obama reauthorized NCLB as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, the federal funding for education expanded to include children from birth through grade three. The ESSA legislation, along with federal funding opportunities like Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grants, Enhanced Assessment Grants (EAGs), and Preschool Development Grants, prompted and enabled state-level systems to evaluate learning and development as students started school — that is, kindergarten readiness — and also as they advanced to third grade.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Many children start school needing extra support to thrive academically in grades K-2 — the foundation for success as they move up the grades. This paper explains how states can address readiness gaps by identifying children at kindergarten entry who may need extra support. A companion paper discusses the design of early grade assessment systems that enable educators to intervene throughout the K-2 years to help students achieve success.

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<https://www.wested.org/resources/kindergarten-readiness-assessments-help-identify-skill-gaps/>

policy perspectives

K-2 Assessment Systems Enable Early Intervention to Foster Student Success

Joanna L. Jensen, WestEd
Jessica Goldstein, Boulevard Research Partners LLC
Matthew A. Brunetti, WestEd

Across the United States, statewide assessments in English language arts and mathematics are federally mandated each school year in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school. The intent is to help educators, policymakers, and parents directly gauge how students and their school systems are performing against state standards. Missing nationwide, however, is any systematic state-level attempt to evaluate students' ongoing progress in grades K-2, the grades that lay the foundation for all later learning.

As noted in the companion paper in this series, as many as 41 states (Center for Standards, Assessment, and Accountability, 2021; Weisenfeld et al., 2020) assess incoming kindergartners to understand how prepared each child is to participate in kindergarten curricula — a critical development, since research shows that, without effective intervention, performance gaps among students as they enter kindergarten persist into third grade (Duncan et al., 2007; Connor et al., 2011; Neuman & Dickinson, 2010).

However, for districts and schools to effectively intervene to change the trajectories for these young students, ongoing evaluation of students' progress throughout kindergarten, first, and second grades is essential. And although many states provide different kinds of early grade assessments, no state currently has a multidimensional statewide K-2 system. When and how to use available K-2 assessments is largely left up to local jurisdictions, with mixed results in terms of teachers' ability to effectively identify and attend to students' learning needs.

This paper focuses on this key K-2 assessment systems and how states can act to address it. We first review a range of assessment types and their utility for supporting learning in the early years of schooling. We then discuss research findings on state K-2 assessment policies that provide insights for other policy leaders to consider as they work to build K-2 assessment systems that effectively help districts and schools support academic success for their youngest students.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Many children start school needing extra support to thrive academically in grades K-2 — the foundation for success as they move up the grades. This paper discusses designing early grade assessment systems that enable educators to intervene throughout the K-2 years to help students achieve success. A companion paper explains how states can lay the groundwork for addressing readiness gaps by identifying, at kindergarten entry, those children who may need extra support to thrive in the early grades.

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Kindergarten Entry Assessments

An Examination of Best Practices, National Trends, and Recommendations

August 2024
Andrea Rolla, Gabriela Mottes, Mel Wyles, and Yetunde Akinola

Kindergarten Entry Assessments (KEAs) are evaluations administered to students before or during the initial weeks of kindergarten. Their primary role is to guide instructional practices and assess developmental progress, with an aim to support children's learning. They encompass various domains, including language, early literacy, and social-emotional skills (Harding et al., 2019).

This brief was developed to support policymakers and practitioners in making data-driven decisions regarding the selection and implementation of a high-quality KEA. Research and subsequent information were gathered from the latest accessible data, including current legislative and regulatory language. The brief outlines the characteristics of high-quality KEAs, explores how these assessments may be used, reviews different types of KEAs and related national trends, and concludes with recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

1

<https://www.wested.org/resources/kindergarten-entry-assessments-an-examination-of-best-practices-national-trends-and-recommendations/>

Overview of Today's Discussion

- **Brief overview of K–3 assessments and policies across the states**
 - Kindergarten Entry Assessments (KEAs)
 - Early Literacy Assessments
- **What are states doing? (A WestEd perspective)**
 - How “risk of reading difficulty” can differ across screening assessments
 - How risk definitions can vary across and within assessments
- **What does this all mean for SEAs and LEAs?**

State K–3 Policies

- **At least 38 states require K–3 assessments**
 - Variety of purposes and types (e.g., screener, diagnostic, formative, summative) and interventions for students (e.g., extended instructional time, individualized reading programs, LEA-determined interventions)
 - At least 29 states require KEAs to be administered to all entering kindergartners
 - § At least 17 states define school readiness in statute or regulation
 - At least 29 states require reading/literacy assessments that can be used to identify reading difficulties or measure reading progress
 - § At least 13 states require retention for third grade students who are not reading proficiently
- **40 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws or implemented new policies related to evidence-based reading instruction since 2013 (as of September 2024)**

Sources:

EdWeek: [Which States Have Passed 'Science of Reading' Laws? What's in Them? \(September 2024\)](#)

Education Commission of the States: [50-State Comparison: State K–3 Policies \(June 2023\)](#) and [Early Grade Literacy: Is Third Grade Retention Effective? \(January 2024\)](#)

State K–3 Policies: KEAs

- **Instruments most used as KEAs (as of July 2024)**
 - Teaching Strategies (GOLD) – *8 states*
 - State-developed – *7 states*
 - AK Developmental Profile, CT KEI, GA KIDS, MI Early Literacy/Math Benchmarks, NM KOT, UT KEEP, TX KEA
 - Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) – *6 states*
 - Ready for Kindergarten: Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) – *4 states*
 - Star Early Literacy – *2 states*
 - BRIGANCE Early Childhood Screens III – *2 states*

Note: Some states rebrand instruments to a more state-specific name (e.g., IL KIDS [DRDP], NC ELI [GOLD]).

State K–3 Policies: Trends in Reading Laws



Source: EdWeek: [Which States Have Passed ‘Science of Reading’ Laws? What’s in Them? \(September 2024\)](#)

State K–3 Policies: Early Literacy Assessments

- **Components of Legislation**
 - Identify students with “significant reading risk” or “at risk for reading difficulties”
 - Develop intervention plans and share with parents
 - Establish reading proficiency goals for students
- **Use Cases for Assessments/Screeners (include but are not limited to)**
 - Identify students who need support
 - Determine need for additional per-pupil funds

Early Literacy Assessments: Purposes

The construct(s) of the assessment is linked to the purpose of the assessment.

Some possible purposes:

- Screening for difficulties, including dyslexia
- Identifying baseline skills
- Informing instruction
- Monitoring progress
- Evaluating effectiveness of programs
- Engaging parents and caregivers
- Informing policy and resource allocation

Early Literacy Assessments: The Market

- Acadience: *Reading K–6*
- Amira Learning: *Amira*
- Amplify: *mCLASS with DIBELS (8th Edition)* and *mCLASS Lectura*
- Curriculum Associates: *i-Ready*
- U. of Oregon: *DIBELS (8th Edition)*
- EarlyBird: *Early Literacy (Bilingual)*
- Edmentum: *Exact Path*
- Istation: *ISIP Reading*
- Literably, Inc.: *Literably*
- NWEA: *MAP Growth*
- NWEA: *MAP Reading Fluency*
- Pearson: *aimswEBPlus*
- Renaissance: *FastBridge*
- Renaissance: *Star Early Literacy (English and Spanish)*
- Renaissance: *Star Reading (English and Spanish)*
- Renaissance: *Star CBM*
- Riverside Insights: *easyCBM*
- UCSF: *Multitudes (new in 2025)*

Notes: This is not an exhaustive list.

Most of these assessments are included on lists approved by the [National Center on Intensive Intervention \(NCII\)](#).

Early Literacy Assessments: Content

- **The assessments on the market can vary in the specific content:**
 - Phonemic awareness
 - Phonological awareness
 - Oral language
 - Oral reading fluency
 - Vocabulary
 - Word recognition
 - Letter-sound knowledge
 - Rapid automatized naming (RAN)
 - Nonsense word reading
 - Listening/Language comprehension
 - Spelling
 - Visual attention
- **Many reading assessments develop a composite score of overall reading ability. However, this is typically defined by the assessment developers.**

What are states doing?

A WestEd perspective

States' Approaches to Screeners

- **Some states have one approved screener**
- **Some states have more than 10 approved screeners**
- **When evaluating screeners for approval, it's important to consider:**
 - What the screeners measure
 - How they measure it
 - How they identify students who need support
 - Future goals for students who are identified

Many different tools are being used for the same purpose, but they can differ in design, content, and administration

- **Initial purpose and design of assessment**

- Almost all screeners identify students with “risk of reading difficulty” or “significant reading deficiencies”
- Screeners identify the students in slightly different ways which can lead to different numbers of students identified

- **Content and administration**

- Which reading skills are important?
- Is there a preference for paper or computer-based tests?
- What is the definition of “at risk” or “significant reading deficiencies”?

California:

Reading Difficulty Risk Screener Selection Panel

Pursuant to Education Code (EC) Section 53008, the State Board of Education (SBE) was delegated authority to appoint independent experts to the Reading Difficulties Risk Screener Selection Panel (RDRSSP) for the purpose of creating an approved list of evidence-based, culturally, linguistically, and developmentally appropriate screening instruments, by December 31, 2024, for pupils in kindergarten and grades one and two to assess pupils for risk of reading difficulties, including possible neurological disorders such as dyslexia.

Colorado: READ Act

The Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act (Colorado READ Act) was passed by the Colorado Legislature during the 2012 legislative session.

The main purpose of K–3 assessments in the Colorado READ Act is to identify “students with a significant reading deficiency” in grades K–3.

- Annual requirement: Interim (3x/year)
- At least one assessment option in Spanish
- Districts/schools select from approved list
- Diagnostic tests for students identified as having a “significant reading deficiency” to inform READ Plans
- Continuous progress monitoring to tailor instruction
- Includes dyslexia screening (phonological processing, awareness, decoding/encoding)

Louisiana:

K–3 Literacy Screener

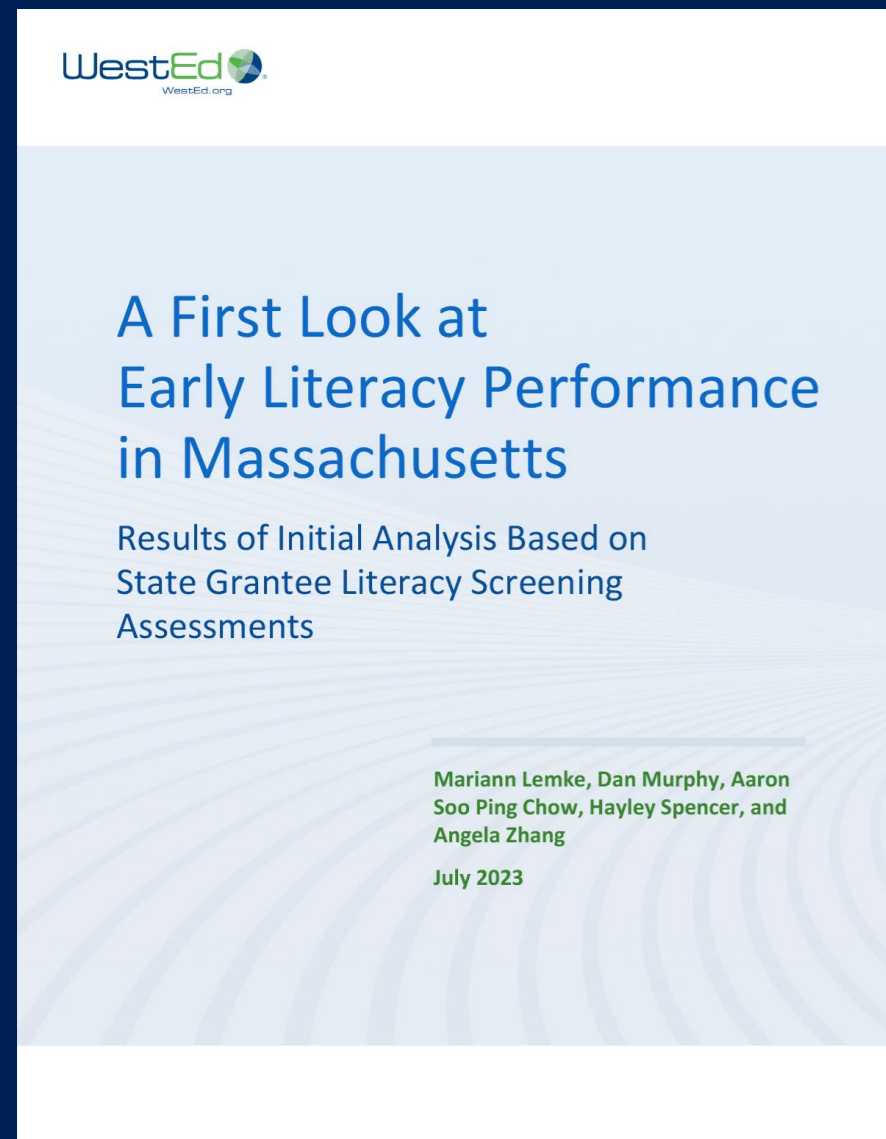
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- **The K–3 Literacy Screener (DIBELS 8th Edition)**
 - Universal screening identifies which students may be *at risk* for experiencing reading difficulties.
 - Teachers use this data to set and monitor literacy goals, as well as provide instructional support.

Maryland:

Ready to Read Act (COMAR 13A.03.08)

- **Requires LEAs to provide screening for all kindergarten students and identified first grade, second grade, and third grade students who may be at risk for reading difficulties.**
 - Includes a provision of supplemental reading instruction for identified students; progress monitoring; annual reporting requirements; and evaluation of the screening program.
- **Requires LEAs to report annual data to MSDE:**
 - websites for students at risk for reading difficulties
 - screeners
 - supplemental instruction
 - number of students screened
 - number of students identified as at risk for reading difficulties
 - number of students who received supplemental reading instruction
 - additional LEA information for students at risk of reading difficulties

Massachusetts: Initial Analysis Based on State Grantee Literacy Screening Assessments



- Beginning with the 2020–21 school year, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) began collecting literacy screening assessment data from schools and districts participating in state grants.
 - About 35,000 K–3 students (43 districts and 159 schools) took screening assessments, which is roughly 10% of the state's total K–3 student population.
 - The screening assessments used in the state differ in their design, administration, and criteria for identifying students who are “at risk” of reading difficulties.
 - Due to the variety of assessments and their different interpretations of "risk," along with students taking these tests multiple times a year, there are numerous ways to identify students at risk of reading difficulties, and what constitutes "risk" can vary between tests.

How “risk of reading difficulty” can differ across screening assessments

Through WestEd work with MA and CO, we have been analyzing early literacy screener data and benchmarks indicating reading risk

Both states require districts to assess all K–3 students to identify those in need of additional support



Colorado: Evaluation of Colorado READ Act

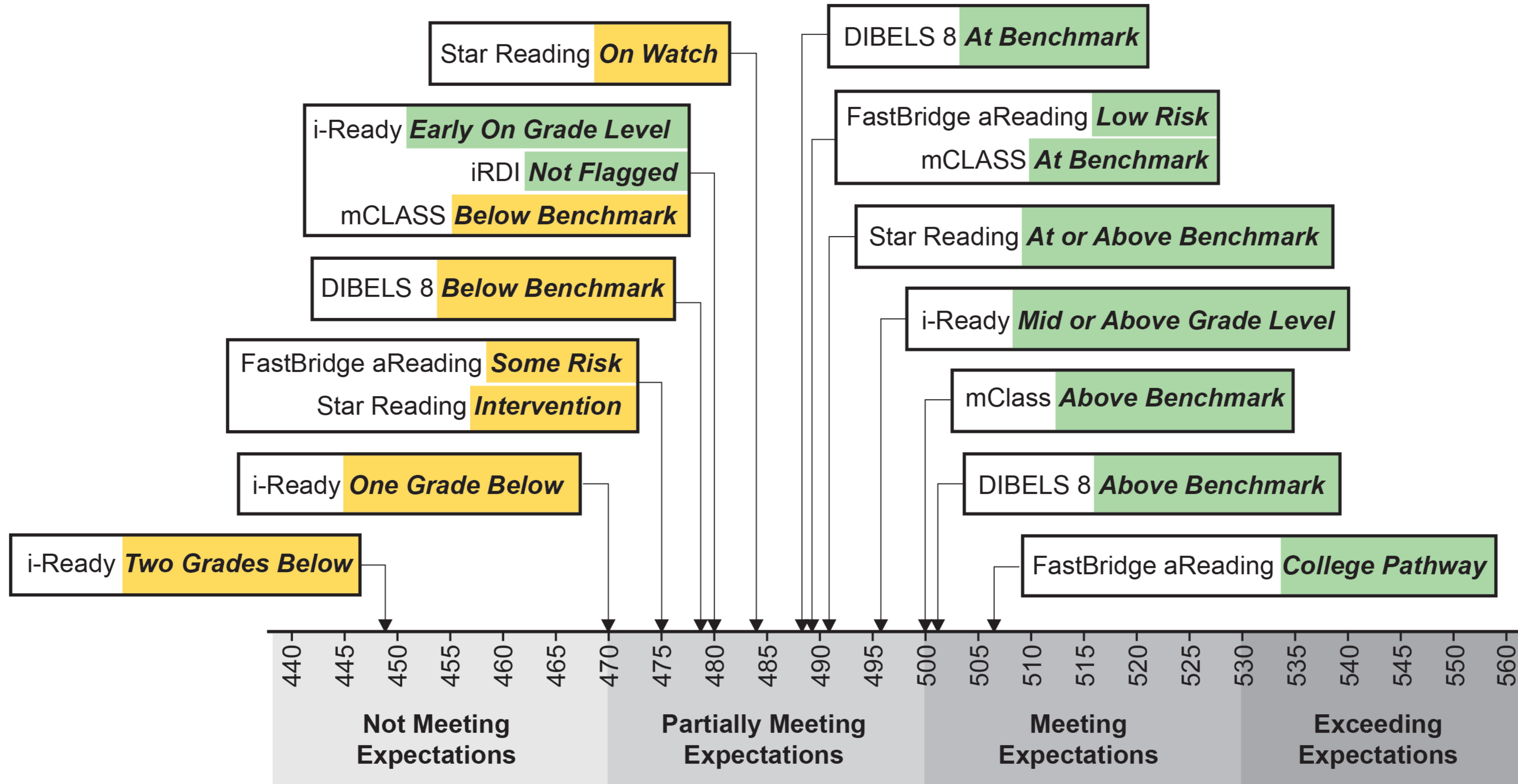


Massachusetts: Analysis of Early Literacy Screening Data

- Analyzing K-3 early literacy screening assessment data to inform DESE understanding of early literacy outcomes

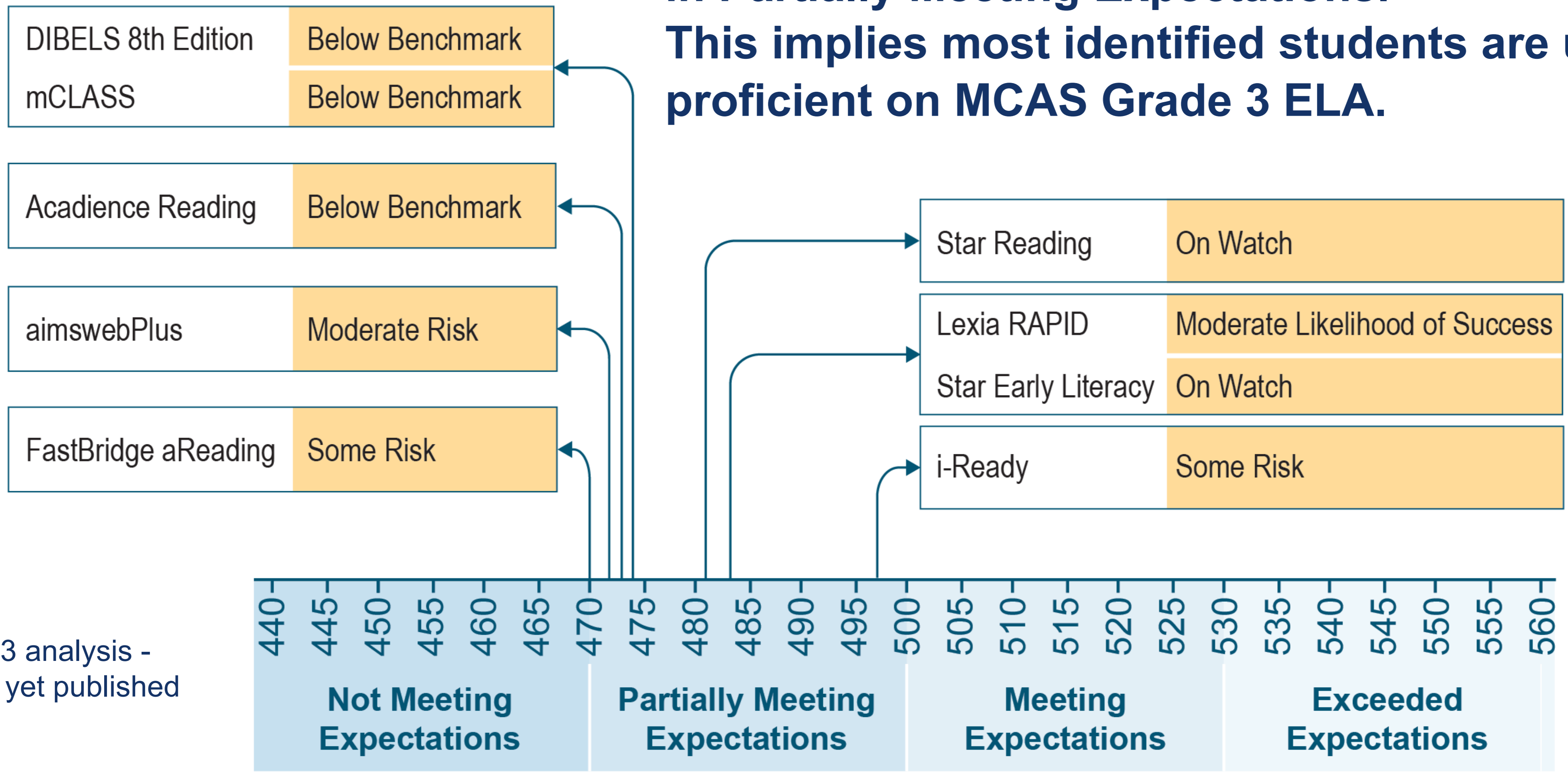
Screener Assessment	Explicit Claim to Identify “At Risk” Students	Content	Administration / Scoring	Method for Setting Cut Scores
Acadience Reading	Yes	PA, PH, F, C	Paper / Manual or Automated	Logistic regression / ROC analysis
aimswebPlus	Yes	PA, PH, F	Paper / Manual	National norms
DIBELS 8 th Edition	Yes	PA, PH, F, C	Paper / Manual or Automated	Logistic regression / ROC analysis
Fastbridge aReading	Yes	PA, PH, V, C	Computer adaptive / Automated	Logistic regression / ROC analysis
i-Ready Diagnostic	No	PA, PH, V, C	Computer adaptive / Automated	Criterion-based Standard Setting
mCLASS	Yes	PA, PH, F, C	Computer / Automated	Logistic Regression / ROC analysis
Star Early Literacy	Yes	PA, PH, V, C	Computer adaptive / Automated	National norms
Star Reading	No	V, C	Computer adaptive / Automated	National norms

Massachusetts Approved Early Literacy Screeners



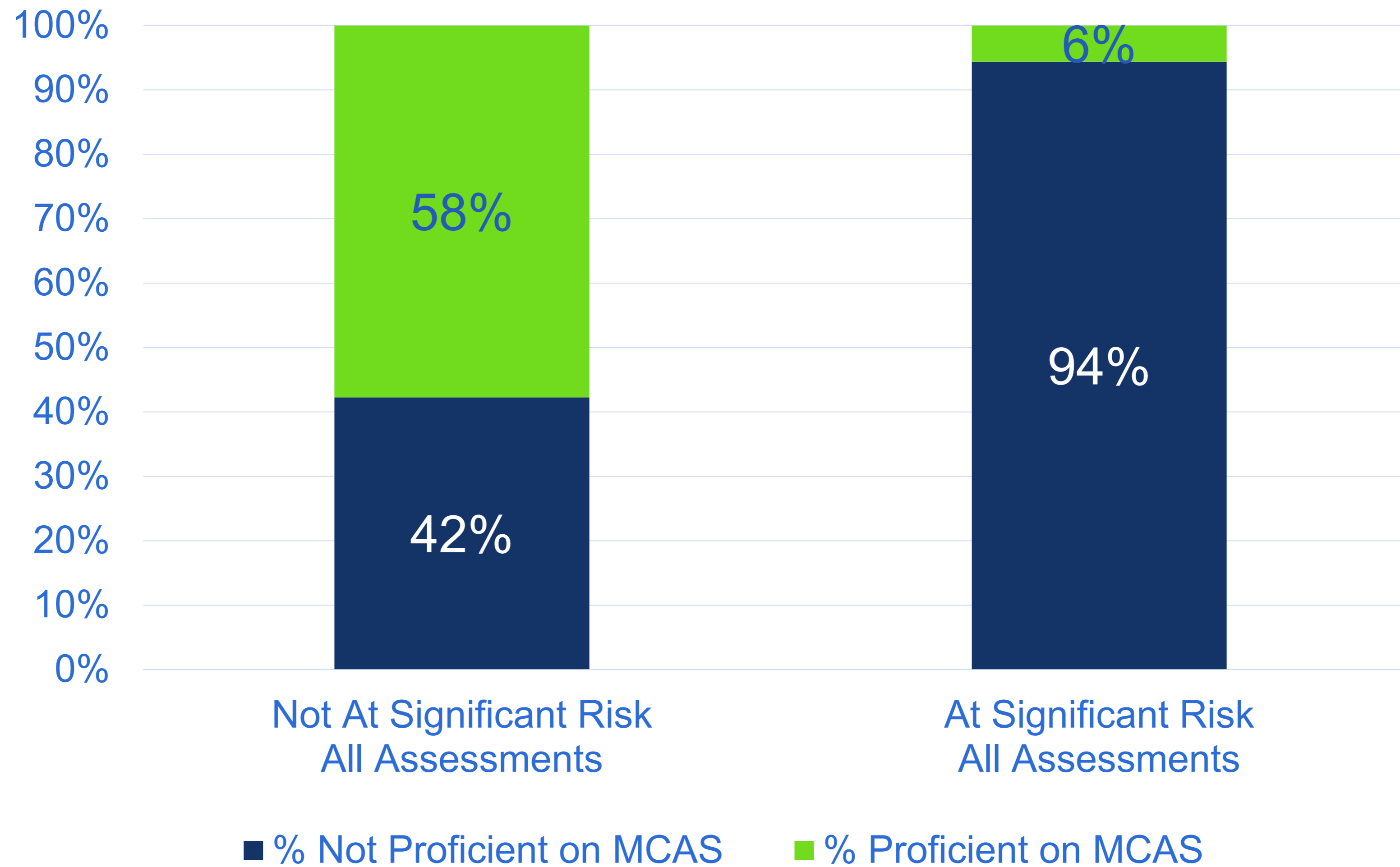
**How risk definitions can vary
across assessments . . .
*and are not necessarily aligned with
grade 3 proficiency expectations***

Some variation in the number of students identified as being “at risk” is expected, but all benchmarks fall in Partially Meeting Expectations. This implies most identified students are unlikely to be proficient on MCAS Grade 3 ELA.



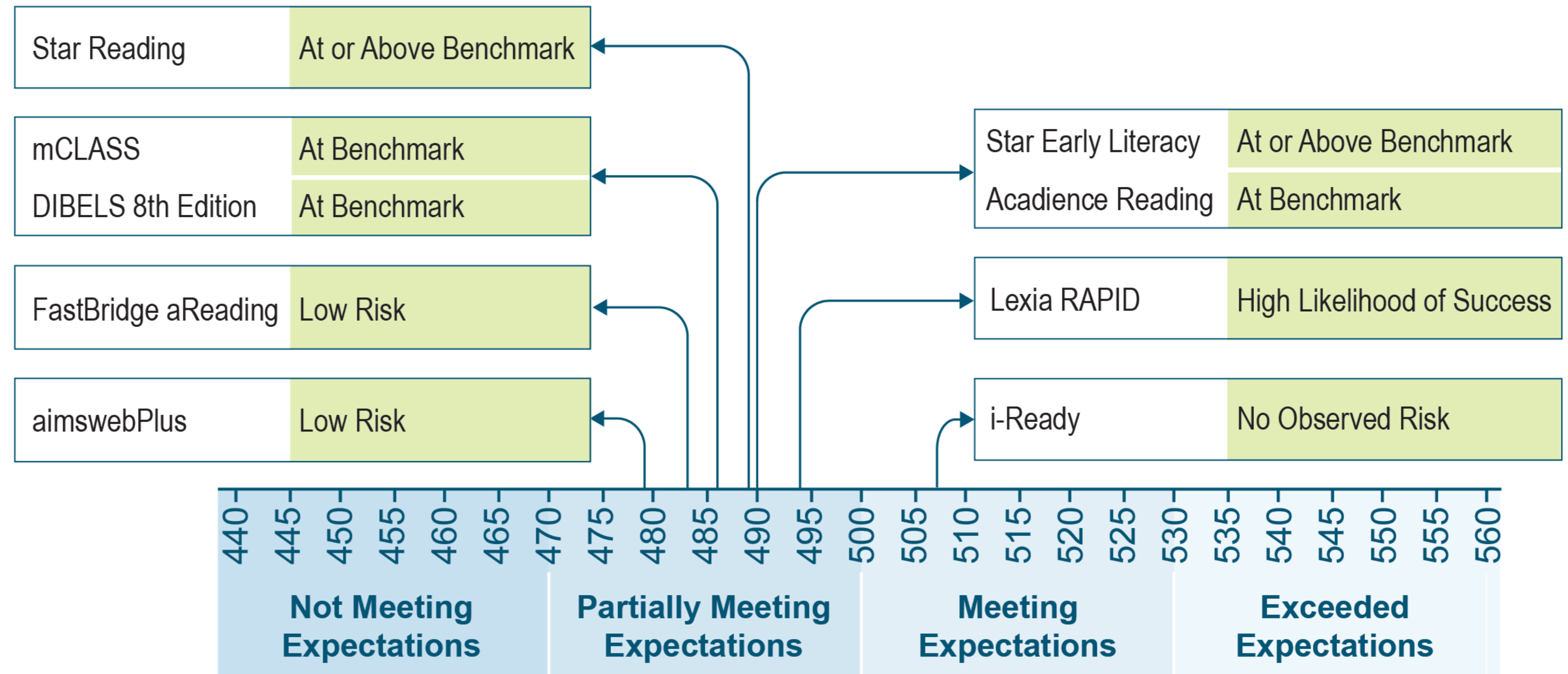
2023 analysis -
Not yet published

MCAS Proficiency Percentages by Risk Status

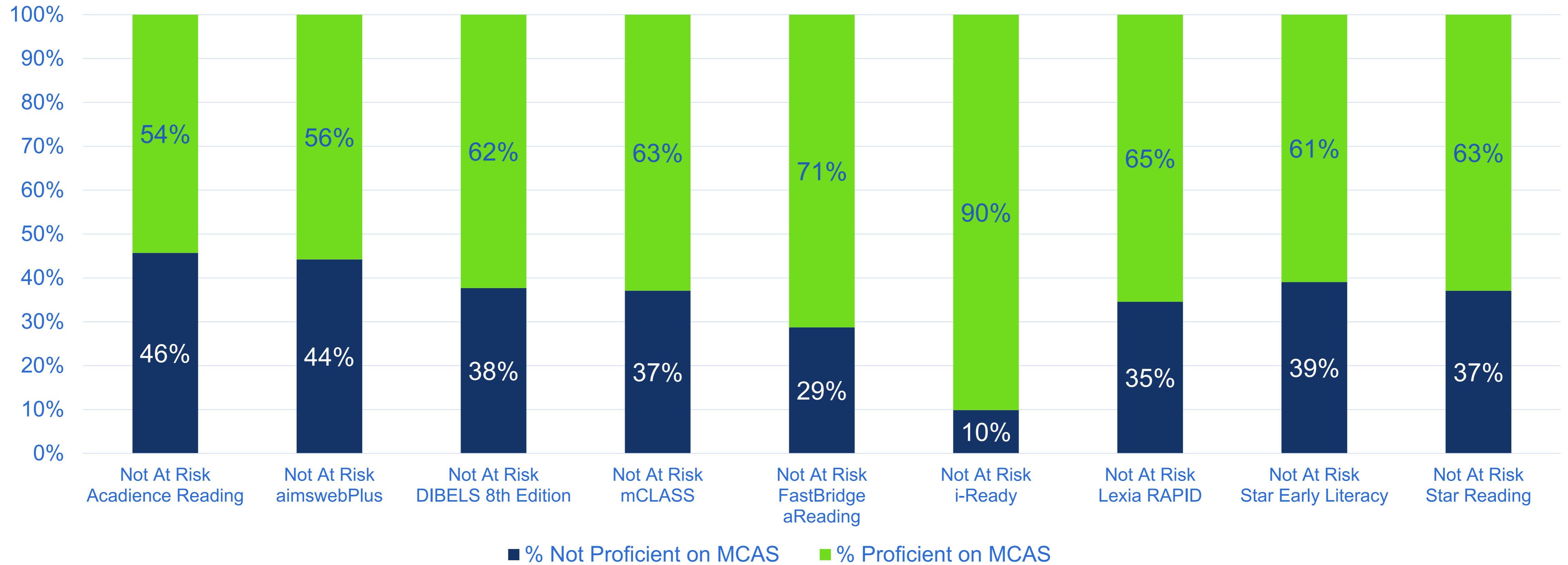


2023 analysis -
Not yet published

Cut scores that identify students at any level of risk don't necessarily indicate which students are on track to meet MA proficiency expectations









MCAS Proficiency Rates for Students Not At Risk on Various Screening Instruments



What does this all mean for SEAs and LEAs?

Ideas to Consider

Validity: the degree to which evidence and theory support the interpretations of test scores for proposed uses of tests (AERA, APA, & NCME, 2014)

-  Screeners measure risk differently but for the same purpose – choose something that meets your needs and goals
-  Be aware that not being identified “at risk” doesn’t necessarily imply proficiency on a state assessment
-  Know that benchmarks can shift within and across years/grades – has implications for interpreting scores and growth for individual students and groups of students
-  More attention to the meaning of “risk” is needed
-  Caution needed when trying to use scores for purposes beyond identifying students in need of support
-  Caution needed when using screeners with bilingual/multilingual students; some vendors have instruments available in Spanish

Additional Resources and References

- [Comparing Early Literacy Assessment: What Really Matters](#) (Blog post)
- **Massachusetts reports:**
 - [First Look at Early Reading Performance in Massachusetts](#)
 - [Opportunity Gaps](#)
 - [Supporting Students Early](#)
 - [How Assessments Differ](#)
- **Colorado reports:**
 - [Interim assessment comparability analysis](#)
- American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education. (2014). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. American Educational Research Association.
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