

CAREGIVER UNDERSTANDING OF LITERACY ASSESSMENT INFORMATION

FINDINGS FROM A STATEWIDE SURVEY OF IOWA CAREGIVERS

Acknowledgements

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Rationale

Caregivers play an essential role in supporting their children's literacy development. Research consistently shows that when caregivers are engaged in their children's education, students demonstrate stronger reading achievement and overall academic success (Jeynes, 2012; Sénéchal & Young, 2008). Meaningful involvement, however, requires that caregivers understand the literacy assessment information schools use to communicate students' reading progress and instructional needs.

Schools use multiple types of literacy assessments, including universal screening, diagnostic, progress monitoring, classroom, and statewide assessments, to identify students' strengths and needs, guide instruction, and communicate progress to families. In Iowa, literacy assessments have become increasingly important as state policy requires schools to notify caregivers about students' reading performance, provide intervention for students identified as at risk, and involve families in educational decision-making through the Early Literacy Implementation Framework and House File 2618 (Iowa Department of Education, 2024).

Despite the growing importance of literacy assessment information, relatively little research has examined what caregivers know about literacy assessments, how they perceive school communication, or what additional information they need (Fish, 2008; Kannan et al., 2021; Mu & Childs, 2005).

To address this gap, the Iowa Reading Research Center conducted a statewide survey of Iowa caregivers of elementary school students. This report describes caregivers' understanding of literacy assessments, their perceptions of school communication and support, and the additional resources they would find helpful. The findings are intended to inform educators, school leaders, and policymakers as they strengthen family-school partnerships and improve communication about literacy assessment data.

Key Findings

This survey examined Iowa caregivers' knowledge, perceptions, and preferences related to elementary school literacy assessment data and identified the following key findings:

- Caregivers generally reported positive communication with schools about literacy assessments.
- Caregivers were better at interpreting literacy data than understanding the purposes of different literacy assessments.
- Caregivers reported moderate confidence in their understanding of literacy assessments while expressing interest in learning more.
- Caregivers relied primarily on schools for literacy assessment information and preferred practical, self-paced resources for additional learning.

Method

Participants

Participants were caregivers of students enrolled in kindergarten through sixth grade in Iowa public, private, and charter schools. Caregivers were recruited through school and district email Listservs, virtual backpack sites, the University of Iowa mass email system, community organizations, and word of mouth. A total of 344 caregivers initiated the survey by completing at least one demographic question. Because participants could skip questions, the number of responses varied across survey sections. Results are reported using all available responses for each section.

Participant Demographics

Caregiver Demographics	%	Caregivers' Child Demographics	%
Type (n = 344)		Grade (n = 338)	
Mother	86	Kindergarten	7.4
Father	12.2	1	13
Legal Guardian	0.3	2	15.4
Other	1.5	3	13.3
Education (n = 344)		4	16.6
Some formal education	1.6	5	18.9
High school diploma	4.9	6	15.4
Some college	16.9	Language other than English (n = 338)	
Bachelor's degree	29.9	Yes	10.1
Master's degree	33.1	No	89.9
Doctoral degree	14.5	Special education services (n = 338)	
Income (n = 339)		Yes	11.5
Less than \$15,000	0.6	No	87.3
\$15,000 to \$29,999	3.8	Unsure	1.2
\$30,000 to \$49,999	4.7	504 plan (n = 333)	
\$50,000 to \$69,999	9.4	Yes	8.1
\$70,000 to \$99,999	19.8	No	87.4
More than \$100,000	61.7	Unsure	4.5
Ethnicity (n = 338)		School type (n = 335)	
White/Caucasian only	87.9	Public	91
Latinx/Hispanic only	4.4	Private	8.7
Asian only	3.3	Charter	0.3
Black/African American only	2.1	Identified as "persistently at risk" for reading difficulties (n = 305)	
Multiracial	1.1	Yes	20.3
Other	1.2	No	74.8
		Unsure	4.9
		Personalized reading plan (n = 305)	
		Yes	15.7
		No	78.4
		Unsure	5.9

Survey

The survey was adapted from previously published surveys examining caregiver knowledge and perceptions of school-based educational processes (Fish, 2008; McKenna et al., 2026). Items were modified to focus specifically on literacy assessments and literacy data.

The survey included six sections:

- caregiver demographics,
- child characteristics,
- perceptions of school communication and support,
- knowledge of literacy assessments and literacy data,
- perceived knowledge of literacy assessments and literacy data, and
- preferences for additional information.

In total, the survey contained up to 46 items, including Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and multiple-response questions. Some questions were displayed only when applicable based on previous responses.

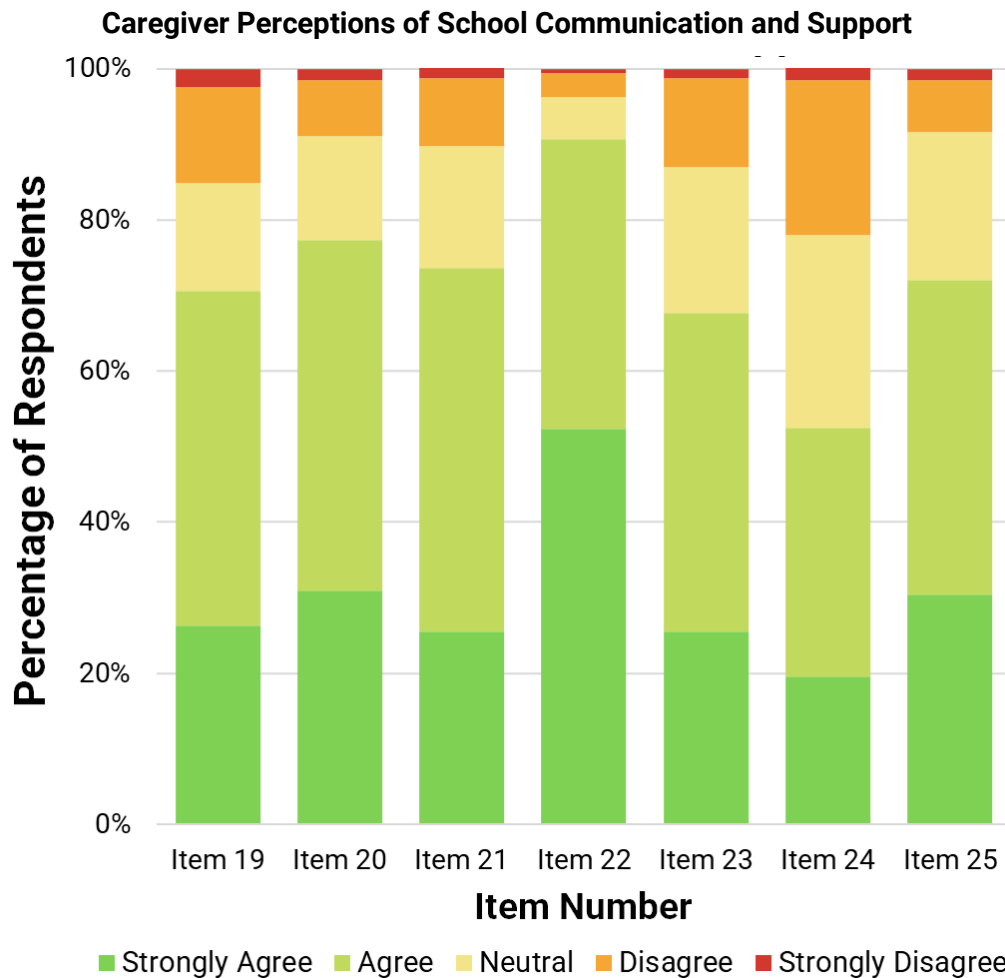
Procedures

All recruitment materials included a QR code and link to the online Qualtrics survey. Eligible participants confirmed their caregiver status through a screening question and reviewed an electronic information sheet before beginning the anonymous survey. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could skip any question. Survey responses were summarized using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, to describe caregivers' knowledge, perceptions, and preferences related to literacy assessments.

Results

Caregiver Perceptions of School Communication and Support

Caregivers generally reported positive perceptions of school communication and support ($n = 323-322$). Responses were most positive regarding schools' use of understandable language, with 90.7% of caregivers agreeing or strongly agreeing. Providing resources to help families interpret literacy assessment data received the least positive responses, although 52.5% of caregivers still agreed or strongly agreed.



Item 19: Your child's school lets you know about the types and purposes of literacy assessments your child completes.

Item 20: Your child's schools lets you know about strengths in your child's literacy skills.

Item 21: Your child's school lets you know about areas of improvement in your child's literacy skills.

Item 22: Your child's school uses words you understand.

Item 23: Your child's school ensures you fully understand your child's literacy assessment data.

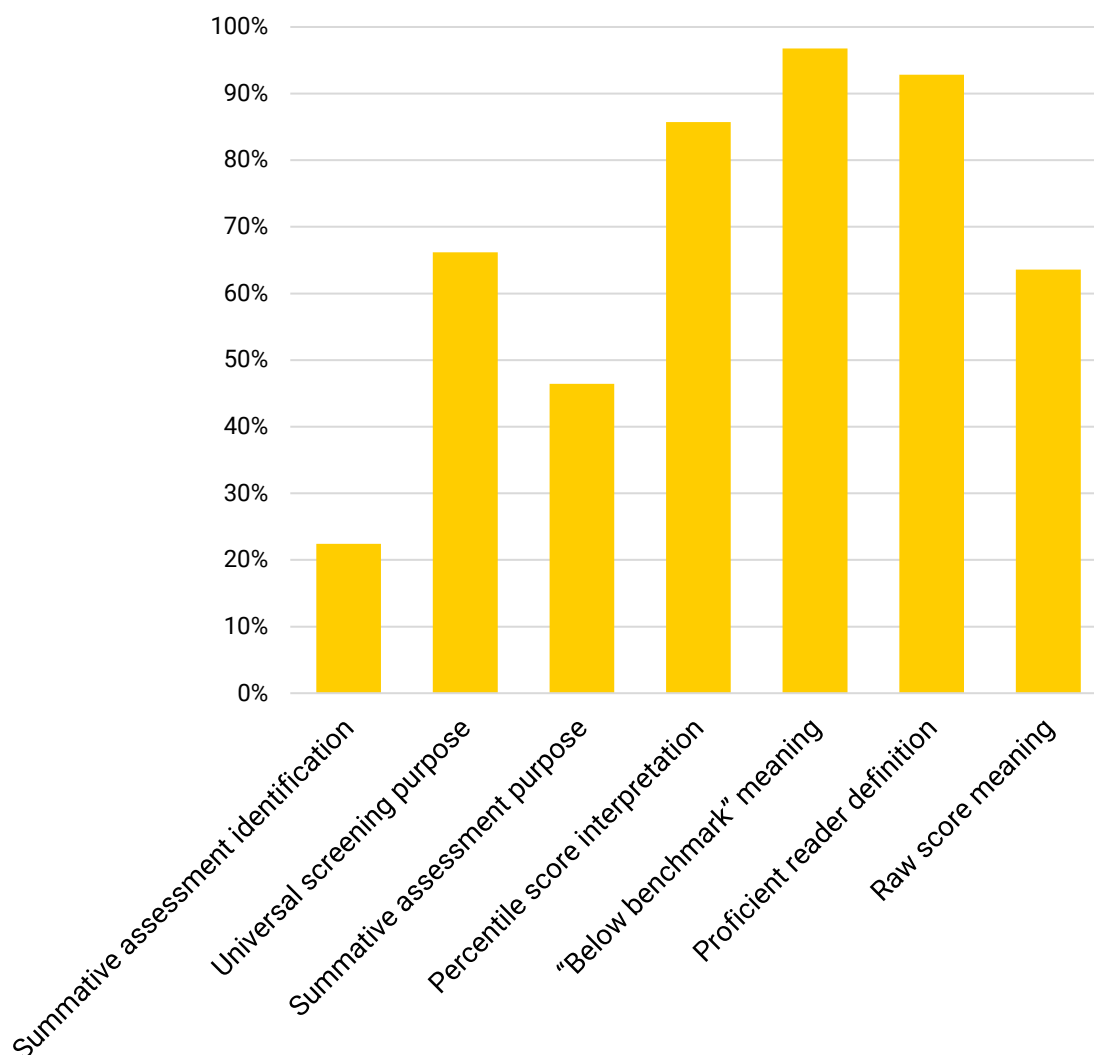
Item 24: Your child's school provides resources to help you understand your child's literacy assessment data.

Item 23: Your child's school sufficiently answers your questions about your child's literacy assessment data.

Caregivers' Knowledge of Literacy Assessments and Data

Caregivers demonstrated varying levels of knowledge across literacy assessment concepts ($n = 279-281$). Caregivers generally understood how to interpret common literacy scores (e.g., percentile scores) and performance terms, including “below benchmark” and “proficiency,” with correct response rates ranging from 85.7% to 96.8%. However, they demonstrated less understanding of assessment types and purposes, particularly summative assessments, with correct response rates ranging from 22.4% to 46.4%.

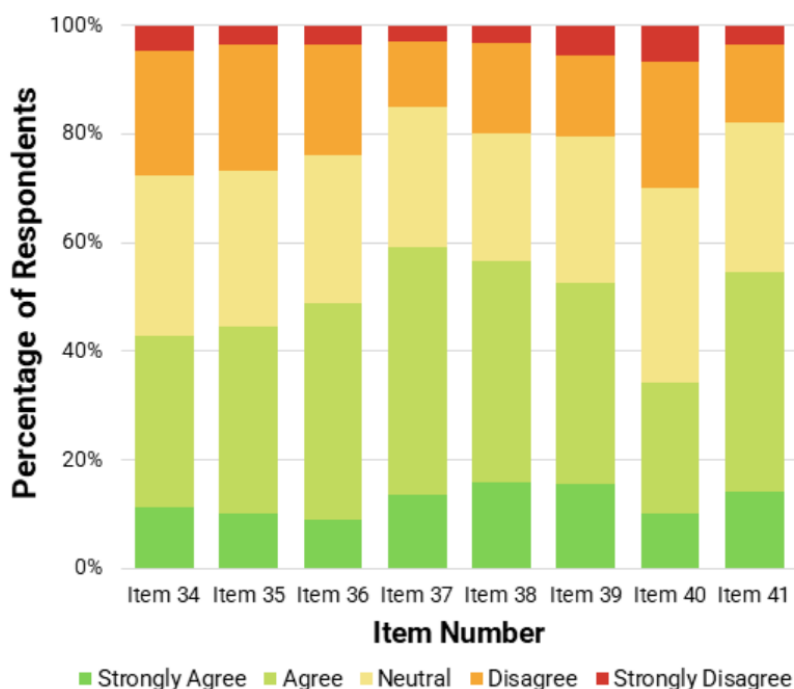
Percentage of Caregivers Answering Literacy Knowledge Items Correctly



Caregivers' Perceived Knowledge of Literacy Assessments and Data

Caregivers reported moderate perceived knowledge of literacy assessments and literacy data ($n = 274-276$). Approximately 59.3% agreed or strongly agreed that they understood their child's literacy data, whereas only 34.3% agreed or strongly agreed that they had access to helpful external resources. In addition, 54.5% expressed interest in learning more about literacy assessments and data.

Caregivers' Perceived Knowledge of Literacy Assessments and Data



Item 34: You have a clear understanding of summative assessments.

Item 35: You have a clear understanding of universal screening assessments.

Item 36: You have a clear understanding of the purposes of different literacy assessments.

Item 37: You have a clear understanding of your child's literacy data.

Item 38: You know questions to ask your child's school about your student's literacy data.

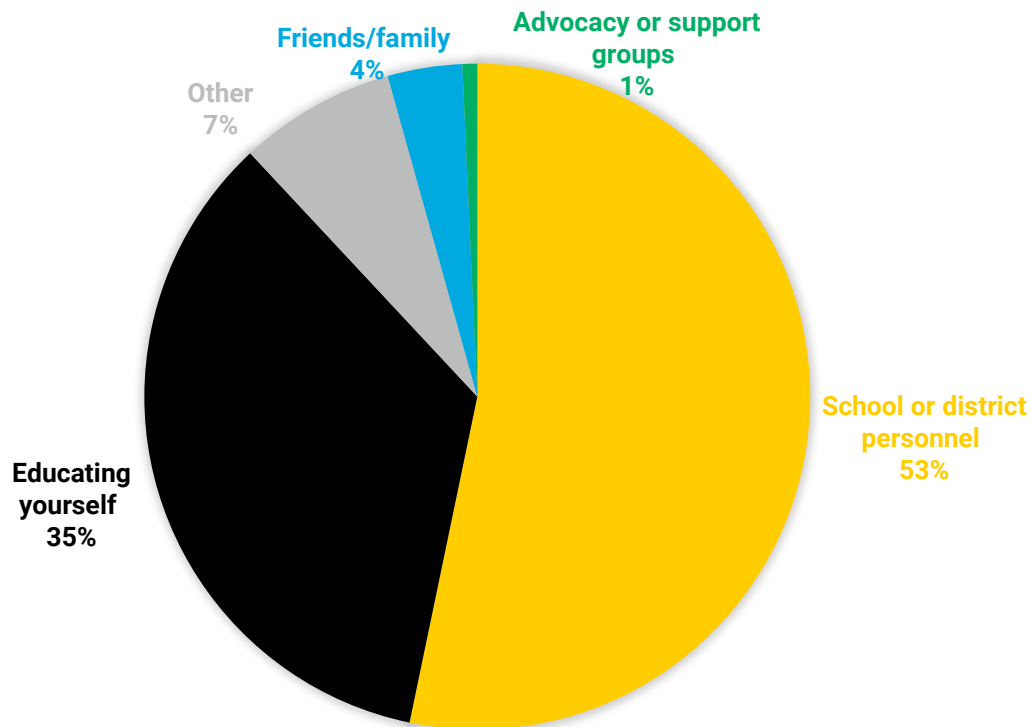
Item 39: You have access to school or district resources that help you understand your child's literacy data.

Item 40: You have access to external resources (not from the school or district) that help you understand your child's literacy data (e.g., resources from non-profit organizations, community advocacy groups).

Item 41: You want to learn more about literacy assessments and/or literacy data.

Additionally, caregivers indicated that the majority of their knowledge of literacy assessments and literacy data comes from the following sources.

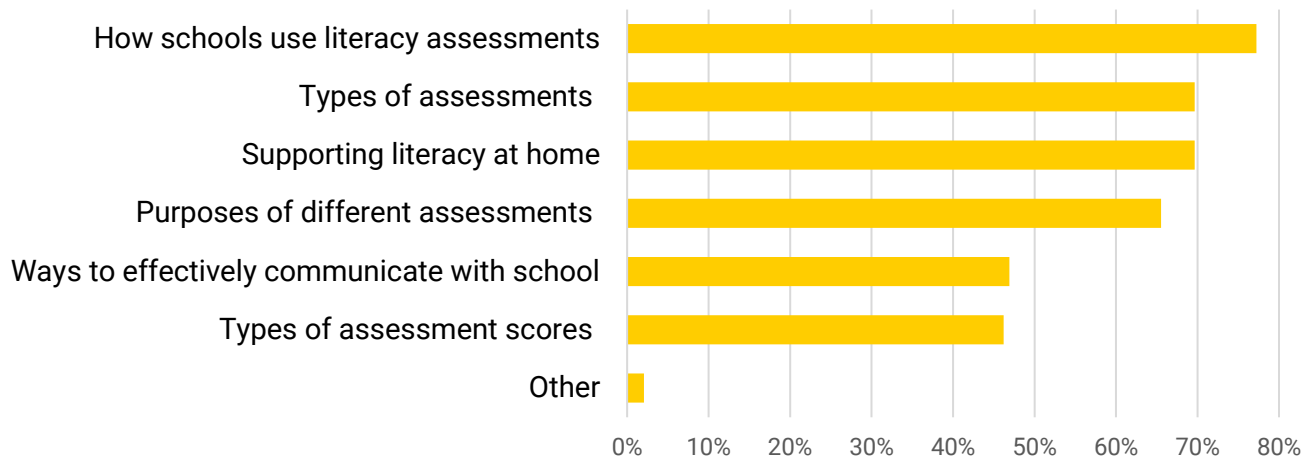
Sources for Caregivers' Knowledge of Literacy Assessments and Literacy Data



Preference for Additional Information

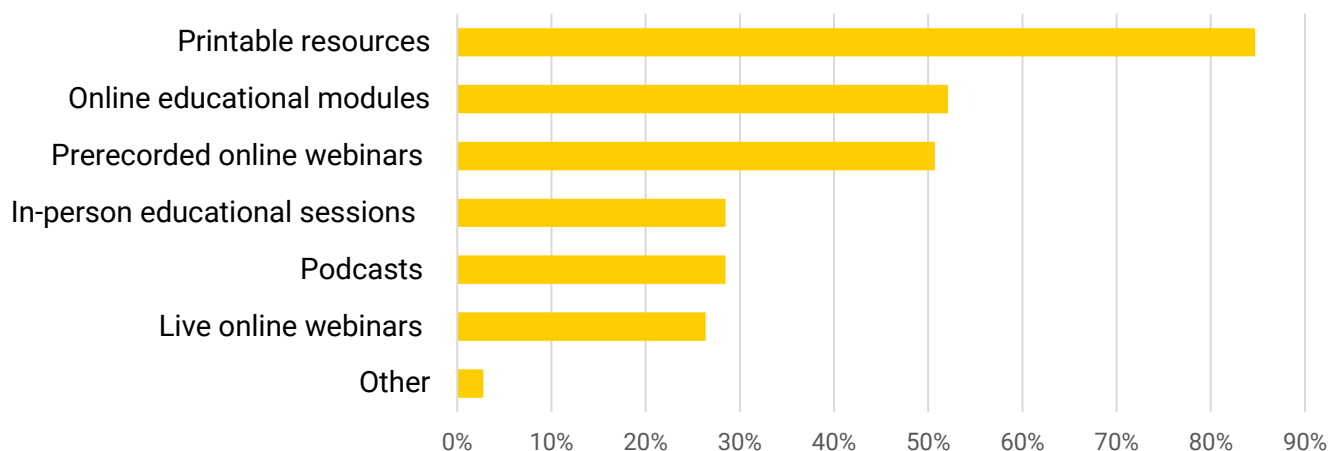
Caregivers were most interested in learning how schools use literacy assessments to guide instruction, the different types of literacy assessments, and ways to support literacy at home. Printable resources were the most preferred format for receiving information, followed by online educational modules and prerecorded webinars.

Topics Caregivers Want to Learn More About



Note. Percentages are based on caregivers interested in learning more about literacy assessments ($n = 150$). Participants could select more than one topic.

Preferred Ways to Receive Information



Note. Percentages are based on caregivers interested in learning more about literacy assessments ($n = 150$). Participants could select more than one topic.

Discussion

Overall, caregivers reported positive communication with schools about literacy assessments and demonstrated a strong understanding of common literacy performance terms. However, they reported only moderate perceived knowledge of literacy assessments and showed less understanding of the purposes and uses of different assessment types, particularly summative assessments.

These findings should be interpreted with caution. The results reflect the experiences and knowledge of this sample, which included caregivers with higher levels of education and household income than the broader Iowa adult population. In addition, the knowledge questions assessed general literacy assessment concepts rather than caregivers' ability to interpret their own child's assessment results. The findings therefore should not be generalized to all Iowa caregivers, but they highlight opportunities to strengthen caregiver understanding of literacy assessments and family-school partnerships.

Given caregivers' interest in learning more, schools may benefit from providing clear, accessible, and printable resources that explain assessment types, their purposes, and how results are used to support students' literacy development.

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