

The 2026 Lexile[®] & Quantile[®] Norms

What Changed, How They Compare,
and Why It Matters

WHITE PAPER

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Key Takeaways



RESEARCH CONDUCTED

March 2026–September 2026

PARTICIPANTS

19,898,345 students in Reading,
K–12

17,102,664 students in Math,
K–12

What Changed?

The 2026 norms are generally lower than the 2020 norms across grades and subjects, with the largest differences observed in lower achieving students.

How They Compare?

The 2026 MetaMetrics norms are reasonably aligned with norms published by other EdTech organizations, including showing similar patterns of flat or declining performance in Grades 11 and 12.

Why It Matters?

These shifts are consistent with broader declines in student performance documented by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and other national studies over the past decade. The 2026 norms provide an updated reference point for understanding where students stand today and for interpreting Lexile and Quantile measures in the context of more recent performance patterns.



Introduction

The K–12 education landscape has changed considerably since the 2020 Lexile and Quantile norms were developed, making it important to update the reference distributions using more recent and broader data. Accordingly, the objective of this research was to update the Lexile and Quantile norms using data that is recent, substantially larger, and broadly representative of the U.S. student population. These updates provide educators, students, families, and other stakeholders with current nationwide reference points for interpreting Lexile and Quantile measures.

The data used to construct these norms reflect typical operational assessment and reporting conditions from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, composed of varying testing programs and student populations. As a result, these norms provide a reference based on a large, geographically diverse sample that was weighted to better reflect the distribution of students across U.S. Census regions, while recognizing that the sample may not fully reflect all characteristics of the national student population. Further details regarding the norming sample and methodology are available in the Lexile and Quantile Norms research brief (Abulela et al., 2026).

The 2026 Lexile and Quantile norms, released in June, 2026, provide the most current reference for interpreting reading and mathematics performance, based on data from students who receive Lexile or Quantile measures. In order to assess the validity of these norms, however, it is important to examine how well they reflect changes in student performance that have been observed nationally over the past decade, and how aligned they are with other educational assessment norms that have been recently published. The following sections present comparisons between the 2026 Lexile and Quantile norms, the previously published 2020 Lexile and Quantile norms, and norms published by assessment providers we partner with to report Lexile and Quantile student measures.

What Do Norms Tell Us?

Norms provide a frame of reference for interpreting assessment results by showing how a student's performance compares with that of a defined reference group. This comparison is often expressed through statistics such as percentile ranks (Oosterhuis et al., 2017). For Lexile and Quantile reporting, norms help educators and families understand how a student's reading or mathematics performance compares with that of students in the same grade and testing period nationwide for whom Lexile and/or Quantile measures have been reported.

Lexile and Quantile norms provide:

- Relative standing, showing how a student's performance compares with that of students in the reference group.
- Percentile ranks, indicating the percentage of students with Lexile or Quantile measures at or below a given value.
- Seasonal frames of reference, or norming periods, for Fall, Winter, and Spring, with separate reference distributions for each testing period.

Norms do not indicate whether a student has met state or local proficiency standards, nor do they show how much an individual student's Lexile or Quantile measure is expected to change over time. They describe the observed performance of students at particular grade levels and testing periods rather than the longitudinal growth of individual students. For more information on how Lexile and Quantile measures identify differences in proficiency standards by state, read Bellwether's "Proficiency Confusion" report (Jamieson et al., 2026).



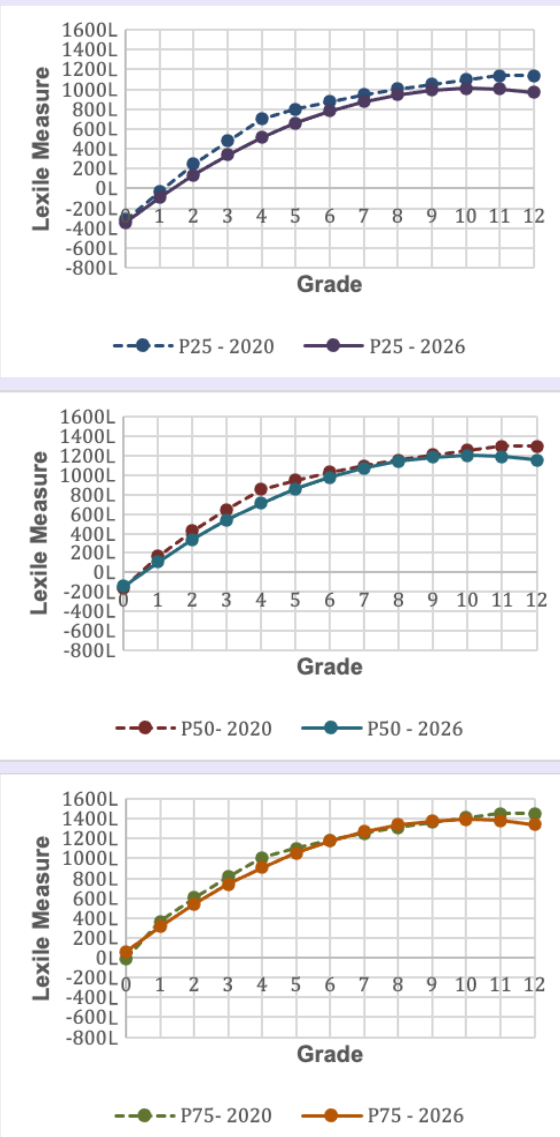
How Do the 2026 Lexile and Quantile Norms Compare to the 2020 Norms?

Key percentile ranks (i.e., 25th, 50th, 75th) for the Lexile Framework are displayed across grades in Figure 1.

The 2026 norms (solid lines) are consistently lower than the 2020 norms (dashed lines), and the gap between them narrows at higher percentile ranks. On average across grades, students at the 25th percentile in 2026 demonstrate reading ability 100L lower than similarly ranked students in 2020; at the 50th percentile this decrease is lessened to 67L; and at the 75th percentile the decrease is 33L. This pattern is consistent for Fall versus Spring norming periods; consequently, only Spring is presented.

In general, the largest differences between the 2026 and 2020 Lexile norms occur between grades K and 4. Close alignment between the two sets of norms is seen towards grade 8; however, the differences increase after grade 8, largely attributed to the 2026 Lexile measures for grades 11 and 12 being progressively lower than those for grade 10. While these results may be unexpected – since reading performance is generally expected to continue to increase in the upper grades, though less than in the lower grades, as students shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” – they represent the actual reported Lexile student measures included in the 2026 norms data.

Figure 1
Spring Lexile Measures for the 25th, 50th, and 75th Percentiles of the 2020 and 2026 Norms



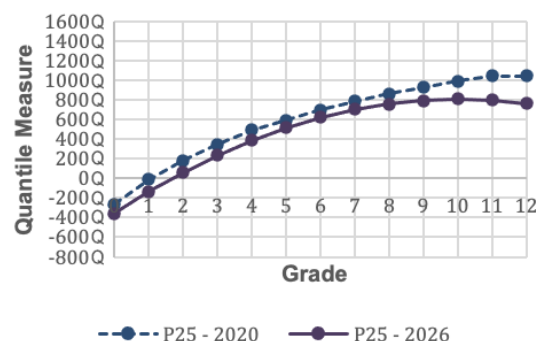
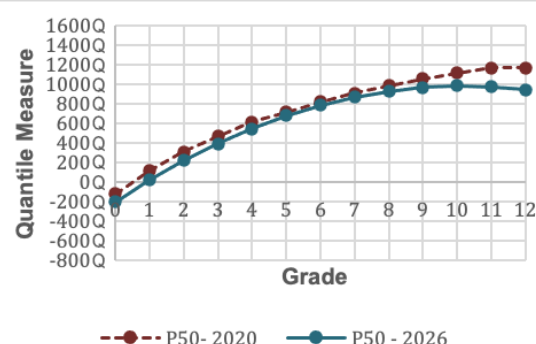
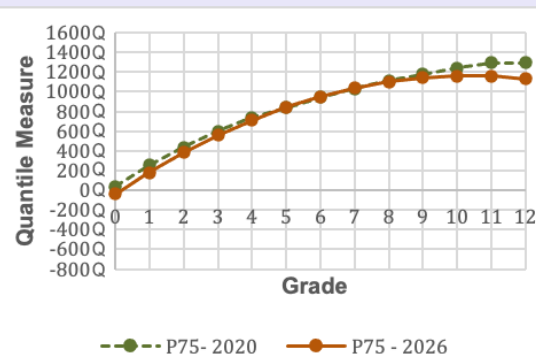


Quantile norms are similarly portrayed in Figure 2.

Again, the 2026 Quantile norms are shown to be lower than the 2020 norms: the average 25th percentile is more than 135Q lower, the average 50th percentile is at least 93Q lower, and the average 75th percentile is more than 53Q lower than the previous norms.

The 2026 Quantile norms are lower than the 2020 Quantile norms in grades K through 4 and then begin to converge, although not to the same degree as the Lexile norms. Beyond grade 10, however, there is a decline in performance at grade 11, followed by an additional decline at grade 12.

Figure 2
Spring Quantile Measures for the 25th, 50th, and 75th Percentiles of the 2020 and 2026 Norms



How Do the Differences Between 2020 and 2026 MetaMetrics Norms Reflect Performance Trends Observed in National Assessment Data?

The declines between the 2020 and 2026 Lexile and Quantile norms reported in this study may not be unexpected; this pattern is consistent with findings observed by researchers, assessment providers, and federal education and assessment agencies. Furthermore, these declines become larger as student achievement levels become lower.



The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has recently published (NAEP, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d) the results of its 2024 longitudinal assessments in reading comprehension and mathematics for grades 4, 8, and 12. In fact, this pattern of decline may have been underway well before 2020. For example, the article, “Why U.S. Test Scores Are in a ‘Generation-Long Decline’” (Miller et al., 2026) suggests that a “learning recession” may have started as early as 2013. Based on research conducted by the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford using the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA), Dewey et al. note that, “In reading, the average annual loss in achievement immediately before the pandemic (2017–19) was just as large as during the pandemic (2019–22).” They suggest that this “recession” may have been due to a reduction in accountability-related assessment and increased use of social media; there is no direct evidence to support this. There is little doubt, however, that the pandemic exacerbated the decline and the success of post-pandemic efforts to reverse this trend has not been evenly spread across the student population, with substantial differences in achievement recovery as a function of per pupil expenditures and absenteeism being observed. Reading scores began to show some improvement in 2024, while mathematics scores began to show some improvement in 2022, but both remain well below pre-pandemic levels, let alone pre-2017 levels. Furthermore, the decline has been far from uniform across students; instead, “the country’s lowest-scoring students are in free fall” (Mervosh, 2025).

The NAEP reports show that from 2019 to 2024, while higher performing students demonstrated small-to-no decreases in performance, lower performing students demonstrated substantial decreases in performance over time in both reading comprehension and mathematics. For both reading and mathematics, student measures at the 50th percentile demonstrate a drop from 2020 to 2026 that is nearly twice the drop observed for student measures at the 75th percentile, while student measures at the 25th percentile dropped about 3 times that observed at the 75th percentile.

It should be noted, however, that the declines reported in the NAEP results and the MetaMetrics norms are somewhat in contrast to what has been reported elsewhere. Kuhfeld and Lewis (2025) pooled data from multiple assessments and concluded that mathematics scores and proficiency levels are recovering somewhat, whereas reading scores and proficiency levels continue to decline, especially for low- achieving students.

Nonetheless, two clear patterns emerge in both the comparisons between 2026 and 2020 Lexile and Quantile norms, and in the research studies documenting the trends in achievement over the past decade:

1. Student performance has declined.
2. The size of that decline is inversely related to achievement level.



How Comparable are the 2026 Lexile/Quantile Measures to the Partners' Norms?

Lexile and Quantile student measures are reported by a wide variety of assessment partners (<https://www2.metametricsinc.com/partner-products>). Many of these assessments are associated with their own publicly-available norms, which have also been updated recently. Using previously constructed Lexile and Quantile linking functions, the norms for two partners were examined to provide evidence for the validity of the 2026 norms. Both of these partners reported norms for grades K through 8, while only one partner reported norms for grades 9 through 12. These partner norms are superimposed on the 2026 Lexile and Quantile norms in Figures 3 and 4. As with the comparison between the 2020 and 2026 MetaMetrics norms, the figures for the Fall and Spring norming periods are sufficiently similar so that only Spring is presented.

The figures show that the 2026 MetaMetrics norms and the partner norms are closely aligned. Lexile measures in grades 1 through 6 are highly similar while MetaMetrics values in Kindergarten and beyond grade 6 are consistently higher than the partner norms, especially at both the 25th and 50th percentiles. Quantile measures demonstrate high similarity across grades K through 8. For grades 9 through 12, the MetaMetrics norms for the 25th percentile are slightly lower than the partner norms, the 50th percentile norms remain closely aligned with the partner norms, and the 75th percentile norms are somewhat lower than the partner norms. It should be kept in mind that only one partner had normative data for grades 9 through 12.

Earlier in this paper, it was noted that beyond grade 10, both the Lexile and Quantile measures in the 2026 MetaMetrics norms showed a decline rather than a continued monotonic increase across all the grades as was seen in the 2020 MetaMetrics norms. The comparison with the partner norms, however, revealed that this phenomenon was not unique to the 2026 MetaMetrics norms. The MetaMetrics and partner norms both show decreases in the Lexile measures from Grade 10 to Grade 11, and from Grade 11 to Grade 12. For the Quantile measures, the partner norms tend to show minimal increases from Grade 10 to Grade 11, and then show decreases from Grade 11 to Grade 12, while the MetaMetrics norms show decreases from Grade 10 to Grade 11, and from Grade 11 to Grade 12. Prior to Grade 10, both sets of norms show monotonic increases across grades. The fact that partner norms show the same patterns of flat or declining performance in Grades 11 and 12 confirms that the MetaMetrics norms accurately reflect student performance at those grade levels.



Figure 3

Spring Lexile Measures for the 25th, 50th, and 75th Percentiles from the 2026 MetaMetrics Norms and Partner Norms

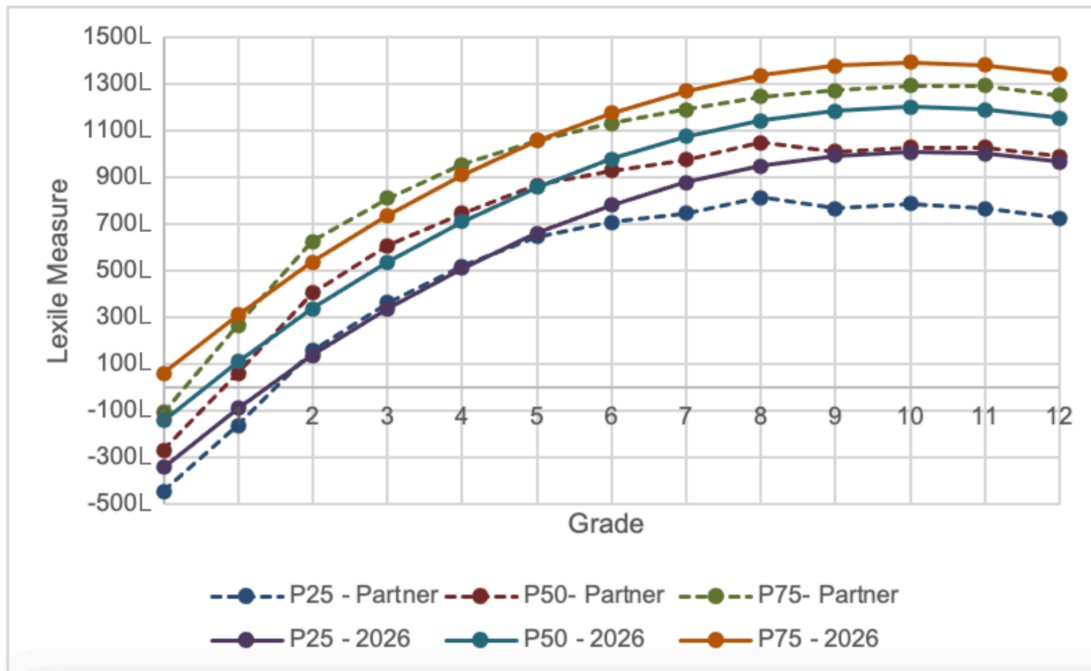
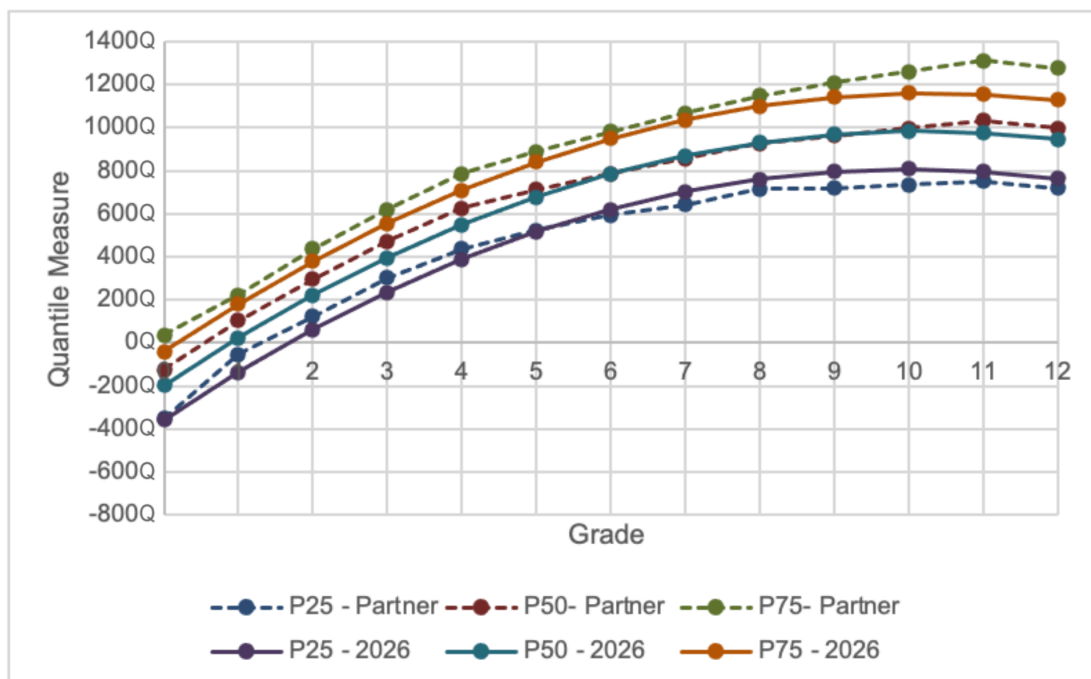


Figure 4

Spring Quantile Measures for the 25th, 50th, and 75th Percentiles from the 2026 MetaMetrics Norms and Partner Norms





Conclusion

In this white paper, the 2026 Lexile and Quantile norms were examined through three lenses: what changed from the 2020 MetaMetrics norms, how the updated norms compare with partner and national patterns, and why these changes matter for interpreting student performance.

The 2026 norms are generally lower than the 2020 norms, echoing downward trends reported in national studies of educational performance, including the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA). Differences between the 2026 and 2020 norms are also larger among lower-performing students, a pattern similarly reported in NAEP and SEDA data.

The 2026 MetaMetrics norms also show alignment with norms published by assessment partners. The Lexile norms are generally well aligned through Grade 6, after which the MetaMetrics norms tend to be higher than the partner norms. The Quantile norms show generally strong alignment across the K–12 grade range, with the main differences occurring among higher-performing students in Grades 10 through 12, for whom the partner norms are somewhat higher. Both MetaMetrics and partner norms also show flat or declining performance in some upper high school grades. Taken together, these comparisons support the assertion that the 2026 Lexile and Quantile norms reflect broader patterns in current student performance.

The construction of the 2026 MetaMetrics norms provides a more current reference for interpreting Lexile and Quantile measures. They can help educators, school leaders, and families understand where students stand relative to more recent national performance patterns rather than relying on reference points developed from earlier cohorts.

Limitations

Because both the MetaMetrics and partner norms show flat or declining performance in some upper high school grades, caution is warranted when using Grade 11 and Grade 12 norms for goal setting. For such applications, Grade 10 may provide a more useful higher-performance reference point.

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