true progress

THE SLOW FADE

The Small Gaps in Lower School That Become the Big Problems in Middle School

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Foreword

By the time a student is discussed in a middle school support meeting, struggling to read, falling behind in every subject, carrying an anxiety label, a processing speed diagnosis, and a parent who is upset nobody caught this sooner, the problem is five years old.

It started in first grade. Maybe second. A small gap. A developmental delay that looked like immaturity, like a late bloomer, like a boy being a boy. The teachers noticed something. They mentioned it at conferences. The parents said they would watch it. The school said the same.

Nobody measured it.

By fourth grade, the gap had compounded. Decoding into fluency into comprehension into vocabulary into background knowledge into every subject that requires reading, which is every subject. What began as something that ten weeks of targeted intervention could have resolved became something that now requires years of intensive work, a neuropsychological evaluation, an accommodation plan, and a specialist caseload that is already full.

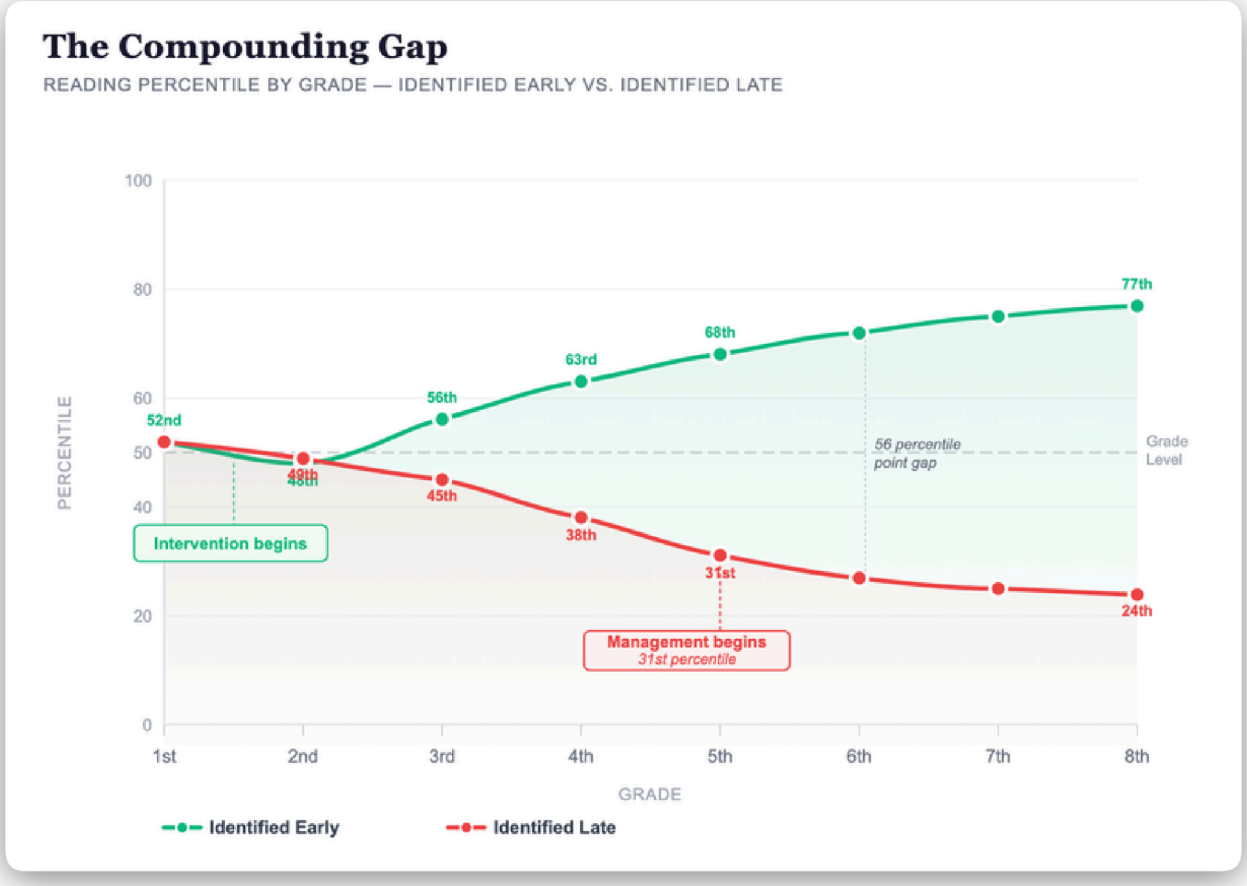
This is not a story about one student. It is the story of how many schools operate. And it does not have to be.

Introduction

Lyon and Fletcher, reporting findings from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, found that **when reading intervention is delayed until fourth grade, it requires four times the instructional time to produce the same gains achievable in first grade.** Not twice. Four times.

Alexander, Entwisle, and Olsen found that reading improvement occurs twice as fast in first grade as in third grade. The same student. The same difficulty. The same type of instruction. Twice as effective two years earlier.

Vaughn and colleagues documented that reading intervention provided after fourth grade increasingly resembles chronic management rather than intervention. The school is no longer closing a gap. It is maintaining a student who will get support indefinitely.



Every year a school does not see a struggling student is a year the problem becomes harder and more expensive to solve.

Why Independent Schools Miss Them

Two reasons. Neither is about effort or intention. Both are structural. Which means both are fixable.

The first is the absence of systematic screening. Most independent schools rely on teacher observation and parent concern to identify students who need support. Teacher observation catches the student who is visibly struggling.

The Problem	The Result
No systematic screening	→ Students compensate until they can't
Public school thresholds	→ Students well below expectations are not seen
Reliance on teacher observation	→ Only visible struggles get attention
No progress rate metrics	→ Students identified late

It does not catch the student who is quietly falling behind, the one who is bright enough to compensate, who has developed strategies that make her look fine while she is learning far less than she could. Without universal screening, a school is relying on the hope that someone notices. Some students get noticed. Others arrive in sixth grade having spent four years falling behind in plain sight.

The second is using the wrong tools. Some independent schools have adopted universal screening, the right instinct, but most available tools were designed for public school districts. Their thresholds are calibrated to identify students below the 25th percentile. In an independent school that averages the 70th percentile, a student at the 45th percentile is not identified. She is above the cut score. She is technically fine.

She is not fine. She is the lowest-performing student in her building, significantly below every peer around her, in a classroom where instruction is aimed at students performing twenty-five percentile points above her. That is a gap of 8 months of learning. The tool does not see her because the tool was not built for her school.

She arrives in middle school.
Now everyone sees her.

Two Measures that Change Everything

Independent schools need two things. Neither is complicated. Both are transformative.

Universal screening at independent school thresholds. Screen every student three to four times a year using a normed assessment. Use an assessment with a threshold for concern that reflects your school, not the publisher's default cut score designed for a public district. In a school averaging the 70th percentile, a student at the 40th percentile is significantly below her peers and deserves attention, discussion, and monitoring. The tool should reflect the reality of your school.

Universal screening answers one question: who is performing below what our curriculum expects right now?

Rate of progress. Calculate each student's progress between screening windows and compare it to expected progress. A student at the 65th percentile looks fine. If she was at the 75th percentile last year, she is not progressing. Her rate of progress is below her peers. She is on a trajectory toward struggle, and that trajectory is visible now, long before the struggle is.

Rate of progress answers a different question: who is not progressing at the rate our curriculum expects?

Together, these two measures give a school something most have never had. Screening at independent school thresholds identifies students who are already behind their peers. Rate of progress identifies students who are in the process of falling behind. One looks at where a student is. The other looks at where a student is going.

Universal Screening	Rate of Progress
Where is the student now? *How does this student's performance compare to what our school expects?*	**Where is the student going?** *Is this student growing at the rate our school expects?*
→ Catches students already behind their peers	→ Catches students in the process of falling behind

Together, they make the invisible visible.

In Practice

Sophie is a first grader at a school that screens every student three times a year. Her fall screening places her at the 52nd percentile in reading fluency. In a public school, that score is unremarkable. At her school, where the average is the 73rd percentile, she is twenty-one points below her peer group. The screening identifies her. Not as a crisis. As a question worth asking.

Her teacher, Mrs. Okafor, is not alarmed. The screening does not tell her Sophie has a disability. It tells her Sophie scored below what the school would expect, and that the gap between Sophie and her classmates is significant enough to warrant a closer look.

Mrs. Okafor administers a brief diagnostic. She finds that Sophie's phonemic awareness, the ability to hear and manipulate individual sounds in words, is more than a year below grade level. Everything else looks good. Sophie is bright, verbal, and engaged. She has one narrow skill that is developing more slowly than her peers. It is the kind of gap that is invisible to the naked eye, because Sophie's intelligence and vocabulary make her look like she is keeping up.

The school begins focused intervention in November. Small group. Three times a week. Focused specifically on the delayed skill. Sophie does not know she is behind. She knows she goes to a group where they play with sounds and letters, and it is fun, and she is getting better at it.

By the winter screening in January, Sophie's phonemic awareness has moved from the 15th percentile to the 38th. By spring, the 56th. Her reading fluency, which had been progressing slowly, accelerates. She finishes first grade at the 64th percentile, twelve points higher than where she started, and her rate of progress between winter and spring is above expected for the first time. Mrs. Okafor shows Sophie's parents the data at the spring conference. There was a gap and it has been addressed.

“Her reading got off to a slow start in the fall,” Mrs. Okafor says. “We identified the specific skill that was developing more slowly, and we addressed it. She responded quickly. She is on level now, and we will keep monitoring to make sure she keeps progressing as expected.”

Sophie's mother asks how they knew. Mrs. Okafor shows her the fall screening data and explains the threshold the school uses.

She shows the rate-of-progress comparison between fall and winter that confirmed Sophie was losing ground. She shows the diagnostic assessment that found the specific gap. And she shows the spring diagnostic that shows it closing. “No one at her old school ever mentioned anything,” Sophie's mother says.

The Difference Between Now and Later

There are two versions of Sophie's story. The school chooses which one it lives.

In the first version, the school has the instruments. Sophie is identified in October. The gap is narrow. The intervention is brief. Sophie never knows she was behind. Her parents never experience the dread of a support meeting. Her teachers never carry the weight of watching a student fall behind without knowing why. The specialist's caseload is not consumed by a crisis that could have been prevented. Ten weeks of targeted work. Done.

In the second version, the school does not have the instruments. Sophie's teacher thinks she is a little slow to pick up reading, but bright enough to catch up. Her parents are told she is developing normally. Nobody measures. The gap compounds. By third grade, Sophie is struggling visibly. By fourth grade, she is evaluated.

There is a diagnosis. The accommodation plan is written. The specialist caseload absorbs another student who will need support for years. The parents arrive at the meeting and ask the question that no one in the room can answer: how did this happen?

Research supports that the first version costs a fraction of the second. A developmental delay addressed in first grade requires roughly thirty to sixty hours of focused intervention. The same delay addressed in fourth grade requires four times that, and produces weaker results. Roughly two out of three students identified early reach grade level with two semesters of intervention. Students identified late face a trajectory that increasingly resembles management rather than intervention.

Independent schools are living one of these two versions right now. The version is determined by whether the school has instruments precise enough to see Sophie in the middle of first grade or only in April of fourth grade.

— The students who will overwhelm the middle school support team are already enrolled. Many of them are in first and second grade right now. The question is whether we can see them.

About True Progress

True Progress began with a single conviction: every student in the building deserves a system that asks whether she is making meaningful progress — not just whether she is meeting expectations. That conviction led to thirty-five years of work in independent schools, building the frameworks, assessments, and operational systems that make student progress visible before a crisis arrives.

Universal screening calibrated for independent school populations. Rate of progress data that makes trajectories visible in real time. A diagnostic system that identifies the specific learning gap. And the workflows and frameworks that help every educator do their best work — for every student, every six weeks.

Over a hundred independent schools use this system. If you want to see what it reveals for a school like yours, we can show you in 30 minutes.

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