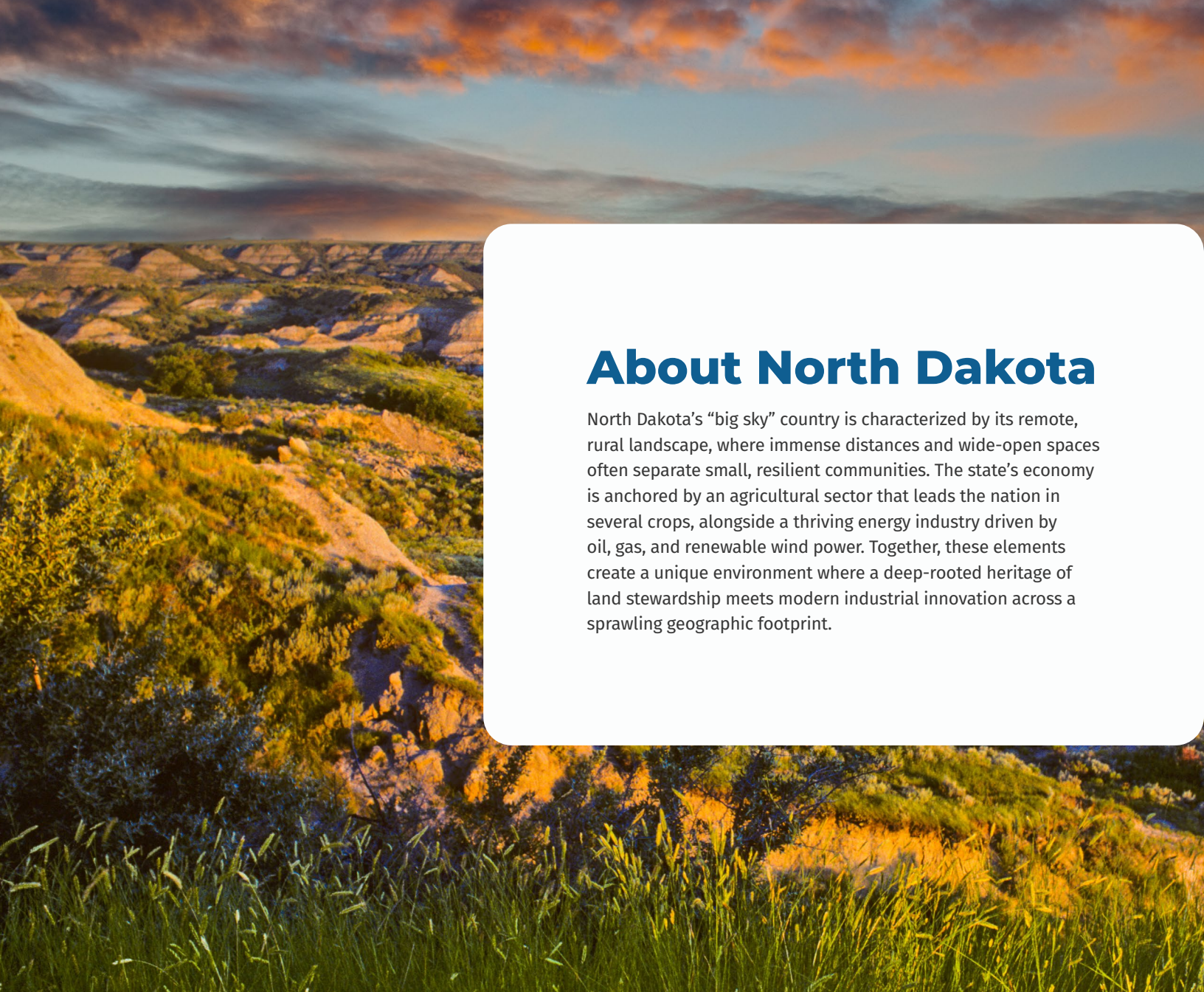




CASE STUDY

# INVESTING IN THE FUTURE:

Five Years of Bridging North Dakota's  
Rural Learning Gap and Strengthening  
Student Outcomes



## About North Dakota

North Dakota's "big sky" country is characterized by its remote, rural landscape, where immense distances and wide-open spaces often separate small, resilient communities. The state's economy is anchored by an agricultural sector that leads the nation in several crops, alongside a thriving energy industry driven by oil, gas, and renewable wind power. Together, these elements create a unique environment where a deep-rooted heritage of land stewardship meets modern industrial innovation across a sprawling geographic footprint.



## The Challenge

North Dakota's expansive geography presents unique challenges for its youngest learners. As one of the most rural states in the nation, North Dakota faces significant "childcare deserts," where the distances between families and high-quality early learning centers can be vast.

For many families in remote areas, traditional brick-and-mortar PreK options are simply out of reach due to travel times and a lack of local infrastructure. These geographic barriers can make it difficult to ensure every child is kindergarten-ready, potentially leading to achievement gaps before school even begins.



## The Opportunity

In 2018, Waterford was awarded a federal Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grant to expand Waterford Upstart to families in the Great Plains states of Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

**Waterford Upstart** is a proven early learning program featuring fun, tailored lessons in reading, math, and science. It helps children develop kindergarten readiness skills. It teaches the foundational skills necessary to read, including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension & vocabulary, language concepts, and communication skills. They also learn foundational STEM skills, including number & cardinality, operations & algebraic thinking, measurement & data, geometry, and science.

Since it's used at home, families get learning tips, progress updates, and support from a caring coach. This helps families create solid learning routines so their child is successful.

When Kristen Baesler, who was the North Dakota State Superintendent at the time, said, ***"Once I started learning about what Waterford Upstart was, I learned they had done the research and placed very intentional limits on that screen time. I learned how strong that family component was, and at that point, it was a deal-maker for me. It was absolutely what we needed in North Dakota."***

North Dakota has been partnering with Waterford since 2019 to bring high-quality instructional materials to the state's 4-year-olds. First, thanks to the EIR grant, and later thanks to state funding, North Dakota children have had access to Waterford Upstart for the past six years.



## Waterford Upstart Participation Since 2019

Nearly **5,500 North Dakota PreK children** have participated in Waterford Upstart from the 2019-2020 through the 2024-25 school years. On average, they engaged in approximately an **hour of high-quality learning each week** in the year before kindergarten.

**79%**

of children come from  
rural areas

**24%**

of children live in households  
experiencing poverty

**100%**

of North Dakota counties  
have had participants

## Kindergarten Readiness with Waterford Upstart

North Dakota children are entering kindergarten with the skills they need to be confident, capable learners. What skills have they developed through Waterford Upstart?

- Recognize most capital letters
- Recognize some lowercase letters
- Know some letter sounds
- Identify the first sound in words (orally)
- Blend sounds in simple words with up to three sounds (orally)
- Write their name
- Recognize some familiar words (own name, etc.)
- Understand how to handle a book and that reading is done from left to right and top to bottom
- Answer questions about stories read aloud
- Follow multi-step directions



As a parent, programs like Waterford Upstart make it accessible no matter how big the town you're living in is, no matter how large or small your home is, as long as you have access to the Internet, this is something that you can learn alongside your child with.”

Erin Oban,  
Waterford Upstart Mom



I think it's a really good jumpstart.”

Nikeya American Horse,  
North Dakota Upstart Father



## Results from the First Cohort:

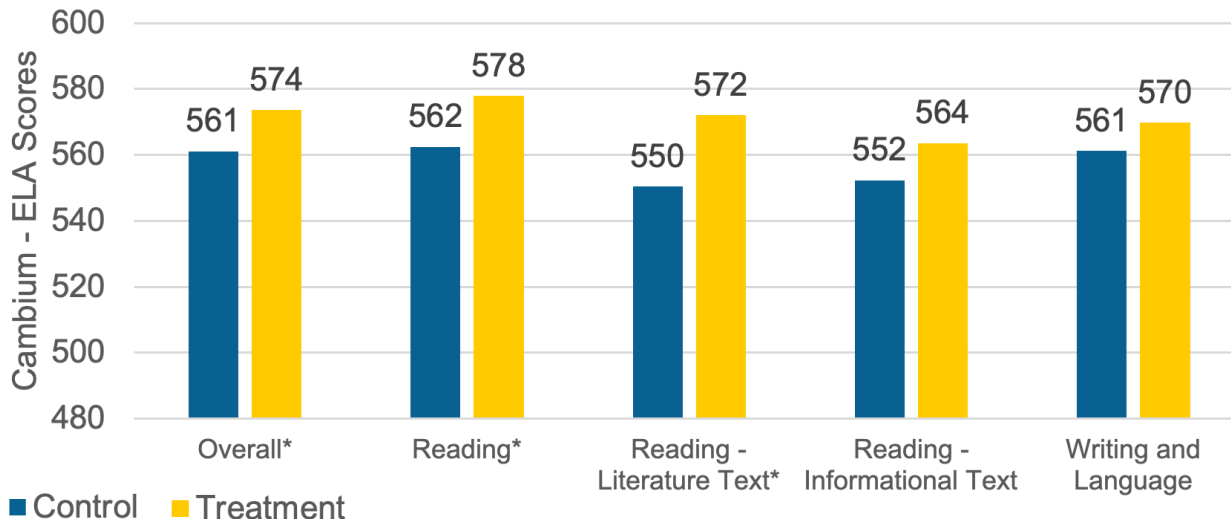
### A Strong Start that Lasts

A recent longitudinal study followed up with North Dakota students who used Waterford in 2019-2020 after they completed third grade. The study showed lasting results.

**Lasting Academic Success:** Students who used Waterford in PreK scored significantly higher on their third-grade state ELA assessments compared to their peers who did not use the program.

**Strong Literacy Foundations:** The most significant gains were seen in the foundational skills Reading and Reading-Literature Text, which are critical predictors of future academic success.

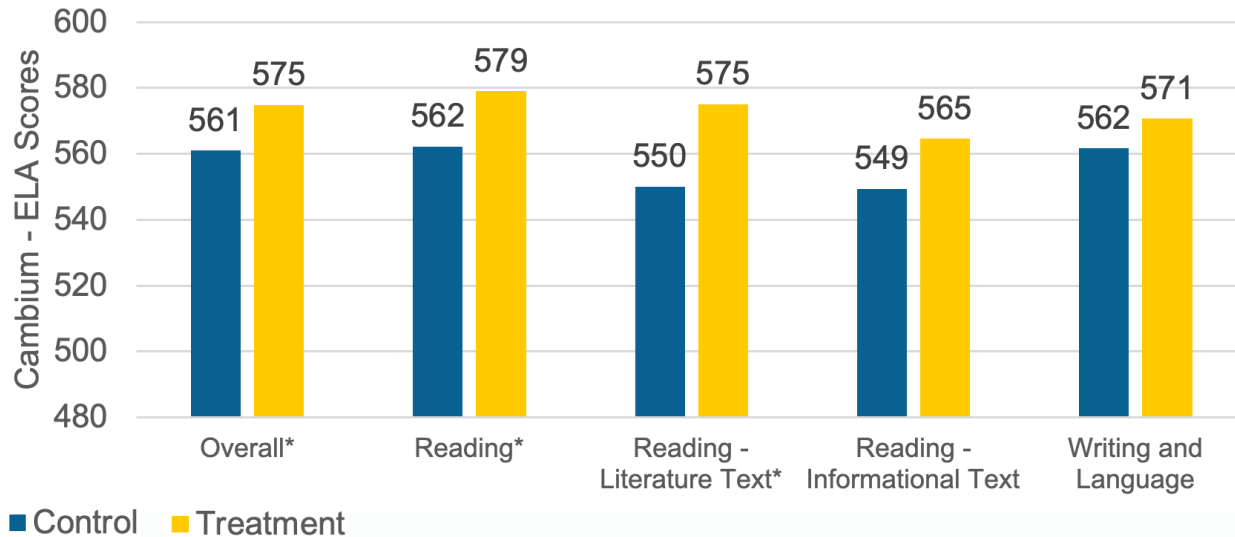
### Matched Sample: Cambium ELA Scores by Literacy Skills





**Consistent Use Leads to Better Results:** Students who used the program with fidelity (at least 1,000 minutes) saw even greater learning advantages, proving that early and consistent engagement pays off years later.

**Matched Sample:  
Usage to Fidelity Cambium ELA Scores by Literacy Skills**





**Positive Trends in Math:** Math trends were also positive across multiple skills, indicating the program’s potential to support well-rounded academic development.

**Matched Sample:  
Cambium Math Scores by Math Skills**

