

EARLY WARNING!

Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters



A KIDS COUNT Special Report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation
SUMMARY

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Summary of a KIDS COUNT Special Report

Millions of American children reach fourth grade without learning to read proficiently. The shortfall is especially pronounced among low-income children: Of the fourth-graders who took the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test in 2009, 83% of children from low-income families—and 85% of low-income students who attend high-poverty schools—failed to reach the “proficient” level in reading. Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is a crucial marker in a child’s educational development. Failure to read proficiently is linked to higher rates of school dropout, which suppresses individual earning potential as well as the nation’s competitiveness and general productivity.

Low state standards mask the extent of America’s low reading proficiency. Each state sets its own standard and uses its own test to measure proficiency. Children in many states may be nominally proficient but still lack the skills to actually read at the level required to learn efficiently in fourth grade and beyond.

Several factors contribute to low reading proficiency. At a minimum, children must be *ready* to succeed when they get to school (cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically) before they can learn there. They need to be *present* at school because they can’t learn if they aren’t there. And they need to have *high-quality learning opportunities*, beginning at birth and continuing in school and during out-of-school time, including summers, in order to sustain learning gains and not lose ground. For millions of American kids, these conditions are not met.

Getting more young children to read proficiently is no mission impossible. Much is already known about how people learn to read and how to impart reading skills, and many sterling programs already exist around the country. The problem is that policies and funding streams are too fragmented, programs too segmented by children’s age and grade, and key interventions too partial to get widespread, positive results.

This is the right time to take on the challenge of dramatically increasing the number of children, especially from low-income families, who read proficiently. With Congress considering the reauthorization of ESEA (No Child Left Behind), and the potential appointment of a Presidential Early Learning Council, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is tapping into the long history of broad bipartisan and cross-sector support for education reform with new initiatives and funding. The work of the Common Core State Standards Initiative, led by governors and chief state school officers through their respective national organizations, is raising expectations for what American children need to know and be able to do. Those resources and activities give us a powerful new chance to help children, parents, communities, and schools close the achievement gap while also raising the bar, ensuring equal opportunities to learn, and improving teaching and learning overall.

If current trends hold true, 6.6 million low-income children in the birth to age 8 group are at increased risk of failing to graduate from high school on time because they won't be able to meet NAEP's proficient reading level by the end of third grade.

TABLE 1

Percent of 4th graders scoring below proficient and below basic on NAEP reading test, by family income and race/ethnicity: 2009

| RACE/ETHNICITY ¹ | BELOW PROFICIENT | | | BELOW BASIC | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| | ALL STUDENTS | LOW-INCOME STUDENTS ² | MODERATE- AND HIGH-INCOME STUDENTS | ALL STUDENTS | LOW-INCOME STUDENTS ² | MODERATE- AND HIGH-INCOME STUDENTS |
| Total | 67 | 83 | 55 | 33 | 49 | 20 |
| White | 58 | 76 | 52 | 22 | 38 | 17 |
| Black | 84 | 89 | 74 | 52 | 58 | 38 |
| Hispanic | 83 | 87 | 72 | 51 | 56 | 36 |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 51 | 70 | 43 | 20 | 35 | 14 |
| American Indian | 80 | 85 | 69 | 50 | 59 | 34 |

¹ Categories exclude Hispanic origin. Results are not shown for students whose race/ethnicity was unclassified.

² Family income is measured using students' eligibility for the National School Lunch Program, a federally assisted meal program, sometimes referred to as the free/reduced-price lunch program. Free or reduced-price lunches are offered to students with incomes below 185% of the poverty level.

SOURCE Annie E. Casey Foundation analysis of data from the NAEP Data Explorer, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>

FIGURE 1

NAEP scale equivalent scores for the state grade 4 reading standards for proficient performance, by state: 2007



¹ Relative error greater than 0.5.

N.A. = State assessment data not available

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

Develop a coherent system of early care and education that aligns, integrates, and coordinates what happens from birth through third grade so children are ready to take on the learning tasks associated with fourth grade and beyond.

The system we envision would promote a widely shared focus on the target results of: **children born healthy; children healthy, thriving, and developing on track** (no untreated health conditions or avoidable developmental delays), from birth through third grade and beyond; **children developmentally ready** (cognitively, socially, physically, and emotionally) to succeed in school at the time of school entry; and **children prepared to succeed** in fourth grade and beyond by reading proficiently by the end of third grade.

We are encouraged by the number of people, organizations, and advocates who recognize the interdependence among pieces of the continuum and who embrace the need to focus on results. We now need to apply that focus to aligning, sequencing, and coordinating collaborative work across the birth-to-third-grade spectrum with the goal of increasing reading proficiency by the end of third grade, within a context that takes full account of the social, emotional, and other non-cognitive factors that are essential to the healthy development of young children.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Encourage and enable parents, families, and caregivers to play their indispensable roles as co-producers of good outcomes for their children.

There is no substitute for the parent's or primary caregiver's role as a child's first teacher, best coach, and most concerned advocate. This role begins early and covers a lot of ground. Parents should: read to and converse with their very young children to instill the language and vocabulary skills that lead to proficient reading later on; cultivate a joy of learning and a desire for education—and then make sure their children show up for school every day; understand why it's important to read proficiently by the end of third grade and then proactively monitor their child's progress toward that goal; encourage their children to choose reading as a free-time activity; find and mobilize help from teachers, schools, education specialists, and/or medical professionals if the child struggles to read; find afterschool activities for their children that provide literacy enrichment and summer activities that protect against summer learning loss; and develop their own literacy and English language skills, if necessary, so they can help their children succeed in school.

Across the country, many organizations already are engaged in difficult and important efforts to promote successful parenting generally and parental support for early literacy and reading in particular. We acknowledge and applaud this work.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Prioritize, support, and invest in results-driven initiatives to transform low-performing schools into high-quality teaching and learning environments in which all children, including those from low-income families and high-poverty neighborhoods, are present, engaged, and educated to high standards.

Secretary Duncan has placed a priority on approaches that improve teaching practices, put the best teachers in schools where they're needed most, and turn around chronically low-performing schools. We applaud these steps and encourage ongoing efforts to align strong curricula, instruction, teachers, and assessments between early care and education and K–3 education. **The continuing challenge for all of us is to become more explicit, consistent, and insistent about the importance of achieving measurable results in the form of improved student outcomes and educator effectiveness.**

In the effort to develop higher, clearer, and more rigorous state standards for reading proficiency, the Common Core State Standards Initiative offers a promising alternative to nationally mandated standards. We applaud their work and remarkable progress made to date. We urge partners in the Common Core State Standards Initiative to accelerate efforts to link K–12 standards to standards for early care and education from birth through kindergarten entry.

To protect against additional unintended and perverse consequences of raising standards, we also need to commit to making sure that all children have access to the high-quality learning environments, resources, and supports needed for learning. We applaud those who are addressing this issue and urge more widespread attention to the critically important task of linking rigorous standards with equitable opportunities to learn.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Find, develop, and deploy practical and scalable solutions to two of the most significant contributors to the underachievement of children from low-income families—chronic absence from school and summer learning loss.

It is important for schools and school districts to develop interventions to catch and track absences, whether excused or not, and develop early warning systems and parent-centered interventions. Similarly, since the problem of summer learning loss is so prevalent, it is not unreasonable to expect curricula components designed to provide some accelerated refresher and review. Even so, it seems unrealistic to conclude that either of these two problems could be solved by schools alone. The newly formed Attendance Counts project urges a comprehensive community-wide effort to “nurture a culture and expectation of regular school attendance.”

The work of the National Summer Learning Association, and others, suggests that the solution to summer learning loss may lie not only in expanding access to language-rich summer learning opportunities, but also in more innovative and widespread deployment of technology. We may need to recruit schools, libraries, and community-based programs to help more children and their families combat summer learning loss.

A Call to Action

America's major education reforms of the past two decades have been both ambitious and, for the most part, bipartisan. At the 1989 Education Summit in Charlottesville, VA, President George H.W. Bush and the nation's governors reached a ground-breaking accord on six national education goals, produced by a panel chaired by then-Governor William J. Clinton. The goals, adopted in 1990, promised a generation of Americans that, by 2000, all children would start school ready to learn, the high school graduation rate would reach at least 90%, all students would demonstrate competency over challenging subject matter, U.S. students would be first in the world in math and science achievement, every school would provide an environment conducive to learning, and all adults would be literate and able to compete in a global economy.

AMERICA 2000, the strategy President Bush proposed in 1991 to carry out the education goals, called for “new world standards” for what students should know and be able to do and for schools that would produce “extraordinary gains in student learning.” In 1994, President Clinton’s Goals 2000: Education America Act codified in law the goals promoted by AMERICA 2000; added two more to improve teacher professional development and parent participation; and challenged “every community, every school, and every state to adopt national standards of excellence [and] to measure whether schools are meeting those standards.” And seven years later, passage of President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act—legislation that Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy helped move through Congress—promised Americans that all students would become at least proficient in reading/language arts, be taught by highly qualified teachers, and graduate from high school.

Today, these promises, all made with broad bipartisan support, remain unrepealed—and mostly unkept. As a nation, we still owe our children a fair opportunity to graduate

from high school “ready for college, ready for a career, ready for life.” Similarly, we owe the nation’s workforce, employers, colleges and universities, and armed forces a larger pool of high school graduates prepared to take up the responsibilities of citizenship and adulthood. The alternative future is one with an enormous loss in individual potential and an unacceptable erosion of our nation’s competitiveness, readiness, and ideals. That is why we conclude this essay with a challenge to the nation’s educators and public officials—federal, state, and local alike: **Keep the promises already made.**

We resolve to do our part, as well. Joining with philanthropic partners in a dozen-plus states representing every region of the nation, we will support a decade-long campaign to move the needle on grade-level reading proficiency. The estimated 4.3 million children born in the United States in 2010, who will leave third grade in 2018–19, add clarity and moral urgency to this campaign. At least in these cooperating states, our 10-year goals are to (1) “close the gap” between the children of low-income rural and urban families and their higher-income counterparts; (2) increase by 50% the number and proportion of students who are grade-level proficient readers by the end of third grade; and (3) “raise the bar” so that these readers truly are proficient by the rigorous standards that will put them on track to graduate from high school and to compete with the rest of the world.

These goals, owned and pursued by a “big tent” coalition of parents, educators, advocates, ordinary citizens, public officials, and leaders in the faith, community, business, and military arenas, are within our reach.

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About the Annie E. Casey Foundation and KIDS COUNT

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of UPS, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and communities fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs.

KIDS COUNT, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children in the United States. By providing policymakers and citizens with benchmarks of child well-being, KIDS COUNT seeks to enrich local, state, and national discussions concerning ways to secure better futures for all children. At the national level, the principal activities of the initiative are the publication of the annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book* and the maintenance of the KIDS COUNT Data Center, which use the best available data to measure the educational, social, economic, and physical well-being of children. The Foundation also funds a nationwide network of state-level KIDS COUNT projects that provide a more detailed, community-by-community picture of the condition of children.

Copies of the full *KIDS COUNT Special Report* (with citations and more data) can be viewed, downloaded, or ordered on the Internet at www.kidscount.org. Additionally, state- and community-level data about a wide range of factors that influence and are impacted by children's early reading proficiency can be found at the *KIDS COUNT Data Center*: datacenter.kidscount.org.

This summary is based on a *KIDS COUNT Special Report* that was researched and written by Leila Fiester in consultation with Ralph Smith, Executive Vice President of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Expert advice on content came from many people within and outside the Foundation, including Doug Nelson, Bruno Manno (now with the Walton Family Foundation), Cindy Guy, Laura Beavers and Florencia Gutierrez (who also provided data expertise), Tony Cipollone, Jessy Donaldson, Simran Noor, Mike Laracy, Lisa Kane, Lisa Klein, Hedy Chang, Ruby Takanishi, Fasaha Traylor, Ann Segal, Lisbeth Schorr, Frank Farrow, Jeanne Jehl, Lisa Roy, Marty Blank, Kati Haycock, Gina Adams, Terry Meersman, Charlie Bruner, Jane Quinn, Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Catherine Walsh, B.J. Walker, Diane Grigsby Jackson, Erica Okezie-Phillips, Susan Notkin, Gail Meister, Ron Haskins, Shelley Waters Boots, Ruth Mayden, Paula Dressel, Yolie Flores, and Sheila Byrd. Our colleagues at Casey Family Services also provided valuable information and insights, including Ray Torres, Joy Duva, Lauren Frey, Diane Kindler, and Eliot Brenner. Cheryl McAfee and Jan Goudreau tracked down countless research reports, often on a moment's notice. Connie Dykstra managed the production process with grace and patience, while Dana Vickers Shelley provided leadership on the communications side.

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