

Why every child should be able to read by third grade

The young children who enter your classrooms each year are eager for new knowledge and new experiences. They live in a world of words—sung, spoken, written, displayed on signs and screens, words of power and meaning that they are keen to grasp. The children’s needs are many: for safety, good food and health, affection, confidence, and all the care their families and teachers can provide. But their most important academic challenge is learning to read.

The research is clear: if children cannot read proficiently by the end of third grade, they face daunting

What makes a reader

Reading is the Open Sesame for acquiring knowledge: learn to read, and you can read to learn just about anything. But learning to read is a complex matter that begins long before a child starts school. In fact, researchers now know that the foundation for reading lies in the oral language children are exposed to and develop in the first three years of life (Hart & Risley, 1995).

The good news, almost all children can learn to read at grade level—researchers put the number at 95 percent, according to a report on reading in Connecticut schools (Carroll, 2010). In that report, researcher Judith Carroll sets out a “road map” for developing grade-level reading, beginning with the first words babies hear and speak. Carroll lists four factors in building reading ability: (1) parents who serve as their children’s first teachers; (2) aate3.4(.3(d)- t)2 ., 2(c)-74.8(c)6 Td[7 ((-d)- to(., 2)-4((c)-74.871.91sA/(9(b)1A(5.163 0 Tq3()-ur)6

Reading-readiness and parent talk/family status. Talking and reading to children play a direct role in

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Why it matters

Because reading is the gateway skill to further learning, children who cannot read proficiently seldom catch up academically and often fail to graduate on time from high school or drop out altogether. In fact, a national study correlating dropout rates with reading ability, poverty, and race or ethnicity among third-graders found that struggling readers accounted for about a third of the students studied but represented more than three-fifths of those who eventually dropped out or failed to graduate on time (Hernandez, 2011).

In his study of some 4,000 students who were not proficient readers in third grade, Hunter College researcher Donald Hernandez found that one out of six failed to graduate from high school on time—four times the rate for proficient readers (2011). Low family income and neighborhood poverty compounded the situation, as did ethnicity:

- ‡ 26 percent of children who were poor for at least a year and did not read proficiently failed to graduate.

Basic fairness suggests that schools and families should do all they can to ensure that children have the reading skills they need for success in school and in life. But it's not just a matter of fairness: promoting equity can also promote economic efficiency, according to Nobel Laureate James Heckman, a professor of economics at the University of Chicago.

"Inequality in early childhood experiences and learning produces inequality in ability, achievement, health, and adult success," he writes, and investing in early childhood education for disadvantaged children results in a 7 to 10 percent annual return on investment (Heckman, 2011).

One clear area of saving focuses on reducing the number of students placed in special education. A recent study from North Carolina, for example, found that at-risk children who attended high-quality preschools were significantly less likely to need special education services in third grade (Muschkin, Ladd & Dodge, 2015). Exyl e2wB9£196 Tot Leai(o4w {i(o4wo-3(lh0.003 (s)6- (s)6ge,)8.9

voice and commands make a difference as well: too many imperatives and prohibitions can actually decrease a child's accomplishments. Other research has found that asking questions, reading books together, and discussing events can also boost a child's readiness for reading (Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, n.d.). And again, disparities show up across racial and ethnic lines. A study of parent involvement and early literature found that young African American and Hispanic children had access to fewer educational resources and less cognitive stimulation at home than did their white peers (Lin, 2003).

The parent education factor. Children whose parents were more highly educated earned higher NAEP reading scores, but fewer minority students had college-educated parents. Among white children, 45 percent had at least one parent with a bachelor's degree or higher, twice as many as African-American children (22 percent) and three times as many as Hispanic students (16 percent). Conversely, the parents of nearly a third of Hispanic children did not complete high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

The family/community engagement factor. Students in preschool and the early elementary grades learn anywhere and anytime, not just at home and in school. Libraries, recreational facilities, museums, and other community-based organizations share with families and schools some of the responsibility for children's learning and development. The Harvard Family Research Project has linked student achievement to early learning experiences at home and in the community and to meaningful engagement of families in schools and other community organizations (Harvard Family Research Project, 2014). There is evidence, however, that schools serving large numbers of poor students and students of color have historically been least successful in engaging the community (McAlister, 2013).

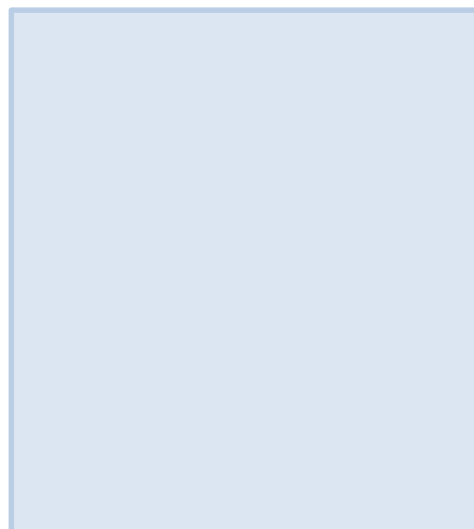
The attendance factor. As important as parent and community support are, if children are not in school, their achievement suffers. One in 10 students in kindergarten and first grade miss nearly a month of school each year, according to a 2014 report from Attendance Works and the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. And chronic absence correlates with reading difficulties in the later grades—especially among low-income children, who are four times more likely to be chronically absent. Children who miss a great deal of school gain fewer literacy skills: the negative impact of chronic absence is 75 percent greater for low-income students in kindergarten than for more affluent children, and 40 percent greater in first grade (Attendance Works and Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, 2014). Minority children are also disproportionately affected. In California, 14.1 percent of low-income students in kindergarten and first grade are chronically absent, compared with 4.7 percent of middle-income students and 2.1 percent of high-income students (Attendance Works and Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, 2014).

The teacher factor. What teachers know about reading instruction, how they focus their teaching, and how much time their classes spend on reading can all affect students' reading skills. Effective practices include a focus on phonics and integrated language arts activities—vocabulary, discussion and explaining what is read (Ryan, 2010). Unfortunately, in their study of trends in professional development, Ruth Chung Wei and her colleagues found a sharp decline in the amount of funding for professional development in reading instruction and an accompanying decline in the intensity of such professional development (Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010).

What school boards should know

The research points to a series of issues school board members should understand. Some factors that affect students' reading proficiency are outside the school's realm—family and neighborhood poverty, for example, and parents' level of education. But schools and districts can have an impact on other important factors:

Access to high-quality pre-kindergarten. Fewer than half (48 percent) of poor children are ready for school at age five, compared to 75 percent of children from more affluent families, but school readiness improves with preschool attendance. In fact, preschool is one of the strongest factors in making disadvantaged children school-ready and can boost their achievement—especially when there is an integrated pre-k-to-third-grade approach, such as the Title I-funded Child-Parent Center Program in Chicago. The effects can be long-term: a follow-up study of poor children who had taken part in the Abecedarian Project, where they received health care, social services, and early learning support, found they were four times more likely to earn a college degree than were similar children (Feister, 2010/2013/2015).



Time in school. The more children are chronically absent in pre-k, kindergarten, and first grade, the more they need help with reading by the end of second grade (Attendance Works, 2014). School interventions can make a real difference, however. The group recommends that schools and districts make sure parents know the value of good attendance and help families overcome problems with transportation, health concerns, and other barriers to attendance. Parents who feel connected to the schools, trust the teachers, and believe the schools are safe will be more engaged in improving their children's attendance.

Time in grade. If children have not established basic reading skills by the end of third grade, it might seem logical to hold them back a year and, in fact, that has been a common, though controversial practice. But Harvard's Martin West reports that students who are held back a year face lower achievement and worse social-emotional outcomes than similar students who are promoted, and they are more likely to drop out of

school (West, 2012). In the early grades, however, the outcome can change when intensive remediation accompanies retention. Bottom line, West says, retention is no substitute for a comprehensive strategy to reduce the number of struggling readers, along with appropriate interventions for retained students.

Extended learning opportunities. Young children spend easily two or three times fewer waking hours in school than out of school. Much of their learning takes place in those out-of-school hours—and, over summer vacation, they stand to lose some of what they have learned in school (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2007). Recognizing this lost opportunity, groups like the National Education Association recommend extended learning opportunities such as before- and after-school programs, summer school, Saturday academies, and an extended school year. A study of preschool children conducted by Kenneth Robin and others for the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) shows the value of extra learning time (Robin, Frede & Barnett, 2006). “Children who attended an extended-day, extended year preschool program,” they write, “experienced greater improvement in test scores compared to peers who attended half day programs.”

To advance or hold back?

Will holding struggling readers back in third grade help them become proficient readers? Many state policymakers appear to think so. The Education Commission of the States reports that 36 states have adopted policies aimed at improving third-grade reading:

- ‡ 16 of those states, plus the District of Columbia, require retaining students who don't meet grade-level expectations in reading but allow exceptions in certain cases (students who receive special education services, for example, or English-language learners).
- ‡ Three more states (Colorado, Oklahoma, and West Virginia) allow retention but don't require it
- ‡ 14 of the 16 states that require retention, plus the three that allow it, also require specific interventions, such as academic improvement programs, assignment to different teachers, individual or group tutoring, involvement of a reading specialist, and supplemental instruction, during school or in the summer (Workman, 2014).

Coupled with appropriate interventions, retention can help struggling students, but it can be a double-edged sword:

- ‡ Retention is expensive. A Brookings researcher has estimated that, based on an average per-pupil expenditure of \$10,700, the direct cost of retaining 2.3 percent of the 50 million U.S. students adds up to \$12 billion e

Teacher capacity. In the face of state and district cutbacks in resources allocated for professional development, it is challenging to build teacher capacity. Wei and her colleagues suggest renewed focus on induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers and opportunities for collaborative work for all teachers (Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010). Also important, of course, is hiring certified teachers who have strong backgrounds in education and training. At the preschool level, CPE reports, many states require specialized training in pre-k or preschool, and many also call for at least 15 hours of in-service training (Gayl, 2008).

Family and community engagement. There's broad agreement—and strong research to back it up—that family engagement is linked to student success. Parental beliefs, attitudes, values, and child-rearing practices all play a part in school readiness, according to the Harvard Family Research Project, as does home-school communication (2014). CPE also finds that partnerships between parents and schools that are focused on academics can have a significant impact on student achievement (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2011). Partnerships that involve community groups and local government agencies—health and social services, for example—can strengthen the result. A 2012 joint report by the Center for American Progress, the Coalition for Community Schools and the Institute for Educational Leadership concludes that students who attend schools that have strong school-community partnerships outperform students in other schools on such measures as test scores and graduation rates (Blank, Jacobson & Melaville, 2012).

What school districts can do

What strategies can school districts employ to ensure students read proficiently by the end of third grade? Research and real-world experience suggest a number of promising policies and practices:

- ‡ To get a handle on attendance, look beyond average daily attendance figures, which can mask chronic absenteeism among a small number of children. In Chicago and Baltimore, regular attendance at school-based preschool and kindergarten was found to boost children's literacy skills—with low-income children making the biggest gains (Bruner, Discher & Chang, 2011). A good data system will enable teachers and guidance counselors to flag chronically absent children so they can follow up with families.
- ‡ To give all children a head start on learning—especially disadvantaged children—invest in full-day preschool and kindergarten. Results from a NIEER study of a low-income urban district led to the conclusion that young children who lag in literacy skills can develop skills that approach national norms if they attend good, full-day preschools (Robin, Frede & Barnett, 2006).
- ‡ To engage parents in their children's literacy, reach out to them about ways they can help build skills through reading, talking, and playing games with their children. Florida's Palm Beach County Schools encourage parent engagement through a number of initiatives, including home visiting, mini-libraries at family gathering spots set up by the district, and enlisting local pediatric offices to promote early literacy.

Hernandez, D.J. (2011). Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

