The Building Blocks of Reading Proficiency, Birth to Age 9

In Massachusetts, 39% of third graders – including 60% of low-income students – do not read at grade level. Among children who read poorly in third grade, 74% will continue to struggle in high school.1 They are less likely to graduate and develop skills essential for contributing to the knowledge-based economy. To ensure that children gain early skills that produce lasting success, there must be a systemic approach to supporting language and literacy development in family, school and community settings beginning at birth.

- **Language-rich home environments.** The foundation for children’s learning begins in the home. By age 3, children in low-income families are likely to have heard 20 million fewer words than children in high-income families.2 Their working vocabulary is roughly half that of more advantaged peers. The result is the onset of a substantial achievement gap well before school entry. Home visiting and family education programs that stress early language and emerging literacy skills are critical to children’s school readiness.

- **High-quality infant/toddler supports.** Approximately 65% of children under age 6 have either both parents or their single parent in the labor force.3 For infants and toddlers, this is a critical time for acquiring language and building vocabulary. High-quality early education and care programs (e.g., center-based, family child care, Early Head Start, etc.) that expose infants and toddlers to language-rich activities have been linked to higher academic achievement in later years.4

- **High-quality pre-kindergarten.** Pre-k is an early childhood intervention supported by decades of research.5 As a first step toward building a larger system, the Massachusetts Legislature in FY07 created the Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) grant program to provide resources to early education programs to achieve and maintain high-quality standards. Overall, $45.67 million has been allocated for UPK since its creation, resulting in 253 UPK Classroom Quality grants serving 6,400 children in more than 100 cities and towns across the commonwealth.

- **Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK).** Research shows that children attending FDK programs receive 40-50% more instruction than children in half-day kindergarten programs, and exhibit greater gains in reading, math and science achievement and lower rates of grade retention.6 Furthermore, children’s vocabulary in kindergarten correlates strongly with their 10th grade reading scores.7

- **PK-3 systems alignment and support.** Elementary education requires a comprehensive set of strategies from pre-k through third grade in order to maximize early learning success. A PK-3 approach creates linkages within and across these grade levels, particularly around curriculum, instruction, assessment and professional development. Doing so can result in a number of positive outcomes, including bridging the gap between community-based early education providers and the K-12 system and sustaining the learning trajectory that takes root in a high-quality pre-kindergarten.

- **High-quality instruction and professional development.** K-12 research has established that teacher quality is the most important school-based determinant of student achievement.8 For instance, students assigned to highly effective teachers for three years in a row have been shown to make far greater academic growth than those assigned to highly ineffective teachers for three years in a row.9 Similarly in the early education field, research shows that teachers’ education, training and compensation levels are the main determinants of early education program quality, which has a direct and positive effect on children’s healthy development.10

Without a stronger commitment to improving children’s language and literacy development, too many children will continue to enter school unprepared and struggle to achieve reading proficiency by the end of third grade. In response to this need, Strategies for Children, Inc., has released “Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success” a 2010 report by Dr. Nonie Lesaux of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This report presents strategies for building a comprehensive early learning system to support children’s language and literacy development from birth to age 9. The report and its recommendations are available at www.strategiesforchildren.org/3research/10_TurningThePageReport.pdf.

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