

The Importance of Reading Proficiency

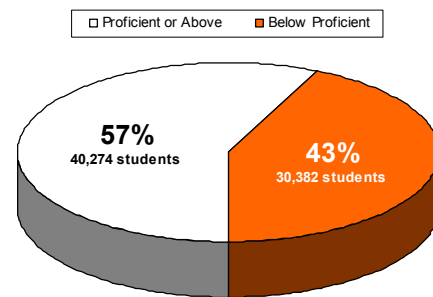
43% of Massachusetts third graders – and almost two-thirds of low-income children – fail to become proficient readers by the time they finish third grade.¹ Both the statewide average and the large achievement gaps for low-income and minority students that have persisted since first being measured in 2001 are cause for concern. Research shows that students who struggle early in school are far less likely to graduate from high school, become effective citizens and develop skills essential for contributing to the 21st century economy. In order to secure educational equity and the future economic viability of the commonwealth, it is critical that we take steps to ensure all children enter school prepared to succeed in the early elementary school years. This brief discusses the importance of developing a comprehensive early learning system, starting at birth, to ensure that all children are proficient readers by the time they enter fourth grade.

Why urgency around reading?

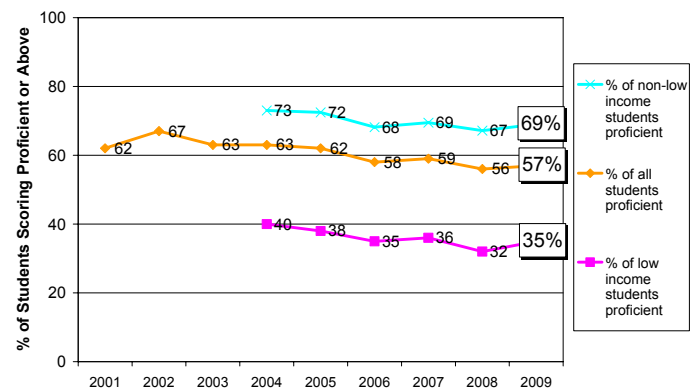
Third grade marks a critical turning point when children are traditionally expected to transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.”² Although research indicates that children should be exposed to rich content and vocabulary from the earliest years, by third grade, children encounter more demanding texts and basic literacy becomes a prerequisite for learning across all subjects. Children who do not attain literacy skills by third grade struggle to catch up in future years.^{3 4}

- Almost three-quarters (74%) of children who read poorly in third grade continue to read poorly in high school, making third grade reading proficiency a key predictor of high school drop out rates.⁵
- Vocabulary size is a key predictor of reading success. Research shows that kindergarten vocabulary correlates strongly with reading ability at every subsequent grade well into high school.⁶
- The inability to read effectively impacts individuals and society in a wide range of ways: lower graduation rates, lower wages, lower voter turnout, greater health problems and higher remediation costs in post-secondary education (estimated to total \$2.7 billion annually).⁷

Third Grade Reading Proficiency in Massachusetts, 2009 MCAS



Third Grade Reading Proficiency in Massachusetts, 2001-2009 MCAS



What we know: Reading proficiency in Massachusetts

The two primary goals of the landmark Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 were to create a more equitable Chapter 70 education funding formula and develop an accountability system based on high standards and student assessments. The 2009 MassINC report “Incomplete Grade” investigated the impact of the 1993 law and found that it led to increased per-pupil spending and increases in student achievement. However, the report also noted that Massachusetts has yet to sufficiently address the achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students that persist throughout the state.⁸

Too many children are not proficient in reading

In both reading and math, Massachusetts outperforms all other states and many nations. However, the state’s achievement gap is one of the largest in the country and reflects the inequities inherent in our current education system. The contradiction is apparent in the “Nation’s Report Card” – the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). On the 2009 fourth grade reading test, Massachusetts had the highest average score of all 50 states, but also posted the 18th largest black-white gap, the eighth largest Hispanic-white gap and the 10th largest income-based achievement gap.⁹

On the MCAS, Massachusetts' own statewide assessment, 30,000 third grade students scored below proficient in reading in 2009. This represents 43% of all third grade students.¹⁰

- The proportion of low-income third grade students that scored proficient or higher (35%) is only half that of non-low income students (69%). This results in a 34 point achievement gap.
- The black-white achievement gap is 31 points (35% vs. 66% proficient or higher, respectively).
- The Hispanic-white achievement gap is 34 points (32% vs. 66% proficient or higher, respectively).
- Less than 39% of students in each of the state's 10 Commissioner's Districts, large high-needs school districts targeted for strategic supports, scored proficient or higher on the third grade reading MCAS.¹¹

Achievement gaps and a low level of early reading proficiency among all students contribute to problems at the opposite end of the education pipeline. Approximately 10,000 Massachusetts students drop out of high school each year, and many more complete high school but not college. Yet today's labor market is one in which most new jobs require specialized skills and at least two years of postsecondary education.¹²

What works: Early literacy

There is an established and growing body of research examining language and literacy acquisition from birth through age 8. This research tends to fall into one of two broad developmental categories: early education and care (birth to age 5) and pre-kindergarten to third grade. As research continues to demonstrate that the achievement gaps among children of different socio-economic groups are present before children enter school,¹³ a growing number of researchers and practitioners have begun paying attention to early literacy skills. A seminal 1995 study by Hart & Risley found that by age 4, low-income children are exposed to 32 million fewer words than their higher income peers.¹⁴ Developmental psychologist and educator Betty Bardige's analysis of these findings reveals that the amount of "play talk" (responsive, imaginative, rich and conversational) that children engage in is a key factor that leads to their own vocabulary and oral language development, and is a better predictor of later school success than family income or race or social status.¹⁵

"A substantial achievement gap exists in America before children ever arrive for their first day of kindergarten.... To close the gap, we must prevent the gap."

– US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan

The most comprehensive review of research on "what works" for early literacy was released in 2008 by the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP).¹⁶ This panel of early literacy experts was organized in 2002 by the National Institute for Literacy, a federal agency authorized to help strengthen literacy across the lifespan and required by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to disseminate information on scientifically-based reading research. The resulting report, "Developing Early Literacy," represents a six-year, \$2 million effort. Its findings point to five promising interventions to develop early literacy skills – the foundation skills needed for later reading proficiency. These five interventions (*NELP nomenclature appearing in italics*) can be used in homes, early education and care settings, and schools:

- High-quality reading instruction that teaches children letter names, letter sounds and sounds within spoken words, as well as how to hear and manipulate the sounds within words (*code-focused interventions*).
- Reading books to children and talking to them about what's being read (*shared reading interventions, interactive and dialogic reading*).
- Deep, sustained work with parents – children's first teachers (*parent and home programs addressing a number of linguistic and cognitive domains*).
- Activities that improve children's vocabulary and listening skills (*language-enhancement interventions*).
- High-quality pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.

Current strategies: A foundation for universal reading proficiency

In Massachusetts, a set of policies and programs is needed to help children achieve reading proficiency by the time they enter fourth grade. From birth to age 8, children spend their time in their homes, in early education and care programs, in schools, and in out-of-school time programs. Each of these environments offers rich opportunities for learning and language development. Supports in each of these settings – whether by family members, early education and care providers, teachers or other professionals – should promote:

- Responsive, language-rich interactions with children, including singing, word games and adult-child conversation;
- Access to books and print materials, and daily reading at home;

- Common literacy standards;
- Assessment and analysis of children’s literacy progress from pre-kindergarten to third grade;
- Meaningful and ongoing professional development opportunities for educators in all settings to strengthen their literacy instruction;
- Professional cultures in which educators receive ongoing feedback and support, and assessment data is used regularly to guide instruction; and
- Opportunities for children to develop a love of reading outside of school.

Embedding these practices in schools, early education and care settings, and homes will require careful attention to the policies and supports that practitioners need in order to effectively enhance their teaching. Careful attention will also need to be given to meaningful accountability mechanisms. The commonwealth of Massachusetts has begun to address these issues through a number of initiatives to promote reading proficiency and better align current policies including:

- **An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap:** Signed into law by Governor Deval Patrick on January 18, 2010, this law increases the state’s authority to turn around under-performing schools. For elementary schools, turnaround strategies are encouraged in statute to include research-based early literacy programs and early interventions for struggling readers, as well as pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten programs if not currently offered. To measure annual turnaround progress, stakeholders must examine data from developmentally appropriate pre-kindergarten to grade three assessments. A representative from the early education community must sit on the local stakeholder groups that will inform elementary schools’ turnaround plans. These early education components of the bill help to ensure that early learning is part of broader education reform efforts.
- **Early Literacy Subcommittee:** This group, led by Commissioner Sherri Killins of the state’s Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), has formulated recommendations about how early literacy skills can be taught, assessed and attained at the early childhood program and elementary school levels. The group submitted its recommendations to the Proficiency Gap Task Force of the board of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE). One early outcome of this work was the “Closing the Early Literacy Proficiency Gap” conference held in March 2010. Co-hosted by EEC and ESE, the conference was the first of its kind in the state to bring together the early education and public school sectors to share best practices for addressing early literacy.
- **Investments in high-quality early education:** In close partnership with the state Legislature, the governor and other advocates, Strategies for Children’s Early Education for All Campaign (EEA) has worked to build the foundation for a universally-accessible high-quality early education and care system. EEA advocated for and supported the creation of the nation’s first independent Board and consolidated Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) and has helped secure more than \$172 million in increased investments in young children and their early education and care since fiscal year 2005. The Massachusetts Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) grant program, established in FY07, has seen \$30.67 million in cumulative funding, resulting in 293 UPK Classroom Quality grants serving 6,600 children in nearly 100 cities and towns across the commonwealth. Similar progress has been made in the area of full-day kindergarten; since FY05, the Kindergarten Grant Program has garnered more than \$27 million in cumulative new state funding which has led to 75% of all current kindergarten students enrolled in a full-day program, up from 38% in 2000.
- **Investments in literacy** – Massachusetts currently funds a number of initiatives that directly relate to early literacy and language development. The Office of Literacy at ESE manages an annual budget of over \$4 million, which funds among other activities literacy grants for professional development partnerships between high-need schools and districts, institutes of higher education, and other professional development providers with expertise in reading instruction. EEC also funds literacy initiatives through the Mass Family Networks, Parent-Child Home Program, and Reach Out and Read.

While there is documented evidence that reading proficiency rates are at unacceptably low levels in Massachusetts, especially among low-income students, and have remained stagnant over time, there is no research-based consensus about why progress has stalled or about what should be done to improve outcomes for children. Strategies for Children Inc. has commissioned reading and language researcher Dr. Nonie Lesaux and her team from the Harvard Graduate School of Education to study this critical and timely subject by consolidating all publicly available Massachusetts-specific reading research and data. The project will produce recommendations to inform policymaking for the purpose of improving

practice and child literacy outcomes at the state and local levels. In addition to issuing a report to policymakers, practitioners and the public, Strategies for Children will host and attend appropriate forums to galvanize advocacy around improving reading proficiency.

The need is urgent, and the challenge is great. The goal of reading proficiency for all children by the beginning of fourth grade will require a sense of shared ownership by multiple stakeholders: families, communities, faith-based organizations, non-profit organizations, businesses, municipalities, school districts, state departments of education and political leaders. Strategies for Children will continue to leverage its core strengths -- research-informed advocacy, strategic communication and constituency building -- to ensure that Massachusetts is doing all it can to achieve “reading proficiency for all.”

For more information, contact Titus DosRemedios, research and policy associate at Strategies for Children Inc. tdosremedios@strategiesforchildren.org or 617-330-7387.

¹ There are four performance levels on MCAS: Above Proficient, Proficient, Needs Improvement, and Warning. Proficiency is defined as the combined sum of the percent of students scoring in each of the top two levels, Above Proficient and Proficient. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2009). *Spring 2009 MCAS tests: Summary of state results*. Retrieved from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/2009/results/summary.pdf>.

² Chall, J.S. (1983). *Stages of Reading Development*, New York: McGraw-Hill.

³ Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

⁴ In this study, students who were poor readers in 3rd grade did not improve their skills by 8th grade. Felton, R. H. (1998). The development of reading skills in poor readers: Educational implications. In C. Hulme & R. M. Joshi (eds.), *Reading and Spelling: Development and Disorders* (pp. 219-233). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

⁵ National Early Literacy Panel. (2008). *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy. [original source: Fletcher, J. M., & Lyon, G. R. (1998). Reading: A research-based approach. In W. M. Evers (Ed.), *What's Gone Wrong in America's Classrooms* (49-90). Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.]

⁶ Snow, C. E., Porche, M. V., Tabors, P. O., Harris, S. R. (2007). *Is Literacy Enough? Pathways to Academic Success for Adolescents*. xix, 153 pp. Baltimore, MD: Paul H Brookes Publishing.; Bardige, B. (2009). *Talk to Me, Baby! How You Can Support Young Children's Language Development*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

⁷ National Early Literacy Panel. (2008). *Developing early literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy; National Center on Education and the Economy. (2006). *Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report on the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.; McKinsey & Company. (April 2009). *The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools*. Retrieved from McKinsey & Company website: http://www.mckinsey.com/App_Media/Images/Page_Images/Offices/SocialSector/PDF/achievement_gap_report.pdf.

⁸ Downes, T., Zabel, J., & Ansel, D. (2009). Incomplete grade: Massachusetts education reform at 15. Retrieved from MassINC website: <http://www.massinc.org/Research/Incomplete-Grade.aspx>.

⁹ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (2010). NAEP Data Explorer. Accessible at: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/dataset.aspx>.

¹⁰ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2009). Spring 2009 MCAS tests: Summary of state results. Retrieved from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/2009/results/summary.pdf>.

¹¹ The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has designated ten Massachusetts school districts as Commissioner's Districts for the purpose of organizing support and assistance through its Center for Targeted Assistance. These ten districts- [Boston](#), [Brockton](#), [Fall River](#), [Holyoke](#), [Lawrence](#), [Lowell](#), [Lynn](#), [New Bedford](#), [Springfield](#), and [Worcester](#) -share commonalities of size, demographics, and level of infrastructure. All ten districts also face similar challenges. They serve among the highest percentages of students living in poverty statewide and contain more than 80 percent of the schools currently designated as Commonwealth Priority Schools. For more information, visit <http://www.doe.mass.edu/sda/ucd/>.

¹² The Massachusetts Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission. (October, 2009). Making the connection: Report of the graduation and dropout prevention and recovery commission. Retrieved from Executive Office of Education website: http://www.mass.gov/Eeoe/docs/Dropout_Commission_Report_10_21_2009.pdf; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2007). Creating A Massachusetts High School Curriculum For College and Career Readiness. Retrieved from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/hstreform/masscore/bg.pdf>

¹³ See for example, Halle, T., Forry, N., Hair, E., Perper, K., Wandner, L., Wessel, J., & Vick, J. (2009). Disparities in Early Learning and Development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). Retrieved from Child Trends website: http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2009_07_10_ES_DisparitiesEL.pdf; Hart, B. and Risley, T.R. (2003). *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Bardige, B. (2009). *Talk to Me, Baby! How You Can Support Young Children's Language Development*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

¹⁶ National Early Literacy Panel. (2008). *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy.

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