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BUSINESS VIEW

Making the grade with literacy

A few numbers from the 2010 U.S. census should concern policymakers, business leaders, educators and residents. The median age in Massachusetts rose from 36.5 in 2000 to 39.1 in 2010, compared with a national average of 37.2. The population between the ages of 50 and 64 increased 36 percent to 1.3 million. Consider next that the number of children under age 9 in Massachusetts fell 9 percent to just under 753,000.

These numbers tell me Massachusetts will have trouble maintaining the pipeline of skilled, well-educated workers our innovation-based economy needs. As a health care provider, I know an aging population will also place increasing demands on this sector of the economy. We all have a huge stake in the healthy development and effective education of young children. We do not have a child to spare.

The first step, as Gov. Patrick rightly noted in announcing the education agenda for his second term, lies in ensuring that children become proficient readers by the end of third grade. Reading is the basis of learning in all subjects. Yet 39 percent of third graders in Massachusetts are not proficient readers. Among children from low-income families, a sobering 60 percent lag in reading.

Research tells us that three-quarters of children who struggle with reading in third grade will continue to struggle in school, substantially reducing their chances of graduating from high school,



**JANET
PORTER**

much less pursuing higher education. This is why I support An Act Relative to Third Grade Reading, now pending on Beacon Hill, which would guide state-wide strategies to improve the language and literacy development of children.

I am proud to chair the board of Raising a Reader Massachusetts, which helps families "develop the literacy routines that can change children's lives." Direct service, however, is only part of the answer. Raising a Reader serves on the Advisory and Policy Committees of Early Education for All, a campaign of Strategies for Children. Although leading economists estimate a 10-16 percent return on investing in high-quality early education for low-income children, funding for the Department of Early Education and Care is down \$104.3 million in inflation-adjusted dollars.

If we are to provide our children with the strong start they deserve, we must increase investments in high-quality early childhood education and focus state attention on preparing children, from birth, to become strong readers.

Janet Porter is executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.