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Early Childhood Education

Springfield Tackles a Benchmark

by Irene Sege, Strategies for Children

The old industrial city of Springfield, Massachusetts, has a long history with the written word. Dr. Seuss, whose rhymes made learning to read fun, was born here. This is the birthplace, too, of Merriam-Webster Inc., the famed dictionary company. Yet for many Springfield children, learning to read is a challenge. Sixty percent of the city's third graders read below grade level, according to the 2011 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), thus missing a critical benchmark that strongly predicts later success.

“Where is the outrage?” asks local philanthropist John Davis, who steered the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation to build on Springfield's existing networks of collaboration and mobilize stakeholders to launch *Read!* The ambitious campaign aims to have 80 percent of Springfield's third graders proficient in reading by 2016.



Photograph: O'Brien Advertising, courtesy of Square One Inc.



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Why Third Grade?

Three-quarters of children who struggle with reading in third grade will continue to struggle, a 1998 study indicates, substantially reducing the likelihood that they will finish high school, pursue post-secondary education, or contribute to the state's knowledge-based economy.¹ A 2011 study finds that third-graders who read below grade level are four times less likely to finish high school by age 19 than proficient readers.²

The MCAS statistic bodes ill for the future of this city of 112,000, where major employers like MassMutual Financial Group and Bay State Medical Center depend on a pipeline of skilled, well-educated workers. Almost 85 percent of students in Springfield's public schools, the state's second-largest district, are low-income, and only 53 percent finish high school in four years. Other demographics: 39 percent of Springfield residents are Hispanic, 37 percent white, 20 percent black, and 2 percent Asian.

"I was in manufacturing for 35 years," says Davis, the former chairman and chief executive officer of American Saw &

Manufacturing. "I saw people interviewed who looked like potentially good candidates. We gave them quick eighth-grade math and reading tests. I saw high school graduates who couldn't pass. One of the reasons you have all these problems is you didn't do the early work."

The issue reverberates statewide. Despite leading the nation on many educational measures, 39 percent of Massachusetts third graders read below grade level, according to the 2011 MCAS, and the state posts a wide and persistent achievement gap. Among children from low-income families, 60 percent lag in reading.

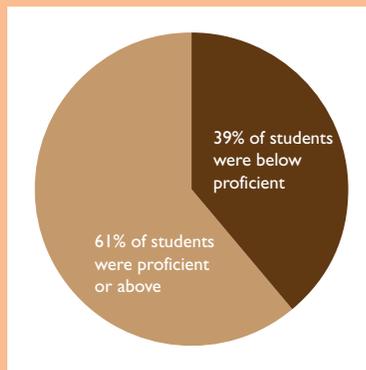
By their third birthday, low-income children, on average, have vocabularies half the size of affluent peers. Children's vocabulary in kindergarten has a correlation with their 10th grade reading scores.³ In addition, low-income children who attend high-quality early education programs are 30 percent more likely to finish high school and twice as likely to attend college.⁴ They command greater incomes as adults and are less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol or be incarcerated. Taken together, these outcomes lead Nobel laureate James Heckman

and other economists to estimate a 10 percent to 16 percent return on investing in young children.⁵

"At a lot of meetings I go to in the community, public safety is the number one issue and then economic development," says Joan Kagan, president and CEO of Springfield's Square One early-education and after-school programs. "Early education, which includes early literacy, is certainly not a silver bullet, but it's a strategic point of intervention. We must start to redefine education ... Education takes place on a 24/7 basis, and everyone has an obligation to participate in the education of all citizens."

The issue is gaining traction nationally. Two-thirds of fourth graders scored below proficient in reading on the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress. Even in top-performing Massachusetts, a sobering 53 percent did not meet NAEP's proficiency benchmark. The national Campaign for Grade Level Reading has engaged more than 70 foundations to focus their giving on improving third-grade outcomes. "More than half of low-income kids do not graduate from high school," says campaign

Many Massachusetts Third Graders Lag in Reading 2011 MCAS



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2011 MCAS scores

Chart courtesy of Strategies for Children Inc.

organizer Ralph Smith, executive vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “What is the inflection point? A research-based approach led us to grade-level reading at the end of third grade.”

Read!

Read! brings momentum and a shared focus to a broad array of initiatives by Davis and others. These include the public schools’ systemwide focus on literacy, emphasizing the third grade benchmark, and a promising place-based initiative for children (birth to 9) and their families in two public-housing developments. A groundbreaking 2010 memorandum of understanding between the school system and the state’s Department of Early Education and Care aimed at aligning community-based early-learning programs with the public schools has led to regular collaboration and joint professional development.

The Hampden County Regional Employment Board—recognizing the link between the quality of early-childhood-education workers and outcomes for the young children who comprise the future labor pool—helps early educators pursue college degrees and other credentials. Springfield is the nation’s largest Reach Out and Read “bookend” city, enlisting all pediatric providers to give books to children, age 6 months to 5 years, and to talk to parents about the importance of reading aloud.⁶

As one of six school districts in the country to receive a Closing the Achievement Gap grant from the NEA Foundation, Springfield uses part of its

\$1.2 million award to expand an elementary school home-visiting program. Local English- and Spanish-language media run tips for parents.

The June 2010 report “Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success,” commissioned by Massachusetts-based Strategies for Children, provides a framework for the Springfield campaign. In the report, Nonie Lesaux, a nationally recognized expert at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, focuses on children’s language and literacy development from birth to age 9 and makes recommendations on program design and implementation, curriculum, assessment, professional development, and family and community engagement. Lesaux’s ongoing work informs both Read! and An Act Relative to Third Grade Reading Proficiency, a bill introduced in Massachusetts in January 2011.

Springfield shows signs of incremental progress. In 2009, 64 percent of third graders were not proficient readers, compared with 60 percent in 2011. Superintendent Alan Ingram credits Read! with helping set “higher expectations for students, schools, families, and the community; better collaborations across organizations and various segments of the community; and measurable gains.”

Springfield’s Edward P. Boland School overlooks the John L. Sullivan public housing development. Boland launched a concerted effort on reading comprehension in 2009, and teachers conduct weekly grade-level meetings in a room lined with charts following student performance. Each classroom has colorful charts monitoring progress, with children identified only by alias or number. “Data,” says Principal Thomas O’Brien, “will drive instruction.”

The school and Sullivan participate in Talk/Read/Succeed! (a Read! initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Davis, and others), which includes John I. Robinson Gardens public housing and Hiram L. Dorman School. T/R/S aims to work with expectant parents and the families of all children between birth and age 9 in the two developments. It brings together the schools, the Springfield Housing Authority, the Springfield Education Association, the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County, Pioneer Valley United Way, and the Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative.

An initial needs assessment found that 58 percent of children under 6 in Sullivan and Robinson were not enrolled in an early childhood program, and 80 percent

of children 6 to 10 did not attend summer programs. Three-quarters of parents were interested in services. Now teachers from both schools conduct home visits, and parent-education classes stress building children’s language skills. The oversubscribed summer program T/R/S launched for children entering kindergarten through fourth grade produced strong results. Of 48 participating children, 36 gained one or two levels on a highly regarded reading assessment.

The road ahead remains difficult. Once efforts demonstrate effectiveness, they must be sustained and brought to scale. “We’ve got to pull in more people. As generous as the Davis Foundation is, we’re a drop in the bucket,” says Davis Executive Director Mary Walachy. “You’ve got to create the outrage.”

Irene Sege, director of communications for Boston-based Strategies for Children, blogs at EyeOnEarlyEducation.org.

Endnotes

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- 3 B. Hart and T. Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, 1995); and C.E. Snow, M.V. Porche, P.O. Tabors, and S.R. Harris, *Is Literacy Enough? Pathways to Academic Success for Adolescents* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, 2007).
- 4 A.J. Reynolds, et al., “Long-Term Effects of an Early Childhood Intervention on Educational Achievement and Juvenile Arrest,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285, no. 18 (2001); and W.S. Barnett and L.N. Masse, “Comparative Benefit-Cost Analysis of the Abecedarian Program and Its Policy Implications,” *Economics of Education Review* (2007): 26.
- 5 Arthur J. Rolnick and Rob Grunewald, “Early Childhood Education’s Big Dividends,” *Communities & Banking* 19, no. 2 (spring 2008), http://www.bostonfed.org/commdev/c&b/2008/spring/Rolnick_early_education_pays.pdf.
- 6 See <http://www.reachoutandread.org/providers/startingaprogram/bookend.aspx>.

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