

Report Targets 3rd Grade Reading as Crucial Turning Point

By Debra Viadero

Eighty-five percent of poor 4th graders in predominantly low-income schools are failing to reach "proficient" levels in reading on federal tests, according to a study issued by a national foundation as it gears up to lead a 10-year effort to raise 3rd graders' reading proficiency.

"The evidence is clear that those students who do not read well have a very tough time succeeding in school and graduating from high schools and going on to successful careers and lives," said Ralph R.

Smith, the executive vice president of the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, which released the report last month. "The Casey Foundation is putting a stake in the ground on grade-level reading by the end of the 3rd grade."

The report gives statistical backing for a forthcoming initiative to ensure that more children become proficient readers by the end of 3rd grade. Details of that venture, which is expected to last a decade and involve other philanthropies and a dozen states, will be unveiled later this year, Mr. Smith said.

The report is the 21st in a series of

"Kids Count" special reports by the foundation. While the previous studies have emphasized Casey's "two generation" approach to improving the well-being of disadvantaged young children and their families, the new report shifts the focus to getting children on the path to reading proficiency from birth through 3rd grade.

Context Matters

Nationwide, it notes that 68 percent of all 4th graders in public school scored below proficient levels on 2009 reading tests administered

through the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a congressionally mandated program. Among states, the percentages ranged from 53 percent in Massachusetts to 82 percent in Louisiana.

National results for the 2009 NAEP reading tests were released in March, and the U.S. Department of Education on May 20 released results in reading from the Trial Urban District Assessment, which compares the performance of students in 18 of the largest U.S. school districts.

The Casey Foundation adds to those analyses, though, by breaking

out passing rates for poor children attending high-poverty schools. The figures suggest that economics and school contexts can exacerbate students' reading deficiencies.

While 83 percent of poor African-American students in schools with low to moderate levels of poverty failed to hit the grade-level reading target, for example, the corresponding percentage for low-income black

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Annie E. Casey Foundation

students in schools with high concentrations of poor students was 90 percent. For economically disadvantaged Hispanic students, the percentage of students falling short of proficiency drops from 88 percent in the schools with the most poor children to 82 percent in better-off schools.

The nation's reading problem is also worse than it seems, the foundation argues, because many states, facing pressure to boost students' scores on state exams, have lowered the proficiency bar. A report last year by the National Center for Education Statistics found, for instance, that only 16 states set their proficiency standards at levels that met or exceeded NAEP's lower "basic" standard.

It's crucial that children master grade-level reading by 3rd grade, the report says, because that's when instruction moves from a focus on learning to read to reading to learn.

Room for Improvement

Among its recommendations for improving children's reading, the report calls for more attention to absenteeism. Nationwide, it notes, an average of one in 10 kindergartners and 1st graders misses 10 percent or more of the school year because of excused or unexcused absences.

Also ripe for improvement, the report says, is the disproportionate learning losses experienced by poor children over the summer.

It also calls for a coherent system of early care and education that "aligns, integrates, and coordinates what happens from birth through 3rd grade" so that children enter 4th grade healthy and ready to tackle more complex reading tasks.



A link to "Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters" is provided at edweek.org/links.