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Original article URL: <http://bridgemi.com/2016/12/vulnerable-kids-cant-improve-reading-if-their-parents-cant-help/>

Guest commentary

Vulnerable kids can't improve reading if their parents can't help

1 December 2016

by Michele Corey

Michigan has a new third-grade reading policy, intended to ensure that everyone entering the fourth grade is successfully reading at the time when the focus of instruction veers from learning to read to learning content material.

After months of debate surrounding the controversial component over retaining students who can't read before entering fourth grade, bills have been signed by the governor and implementation of the plan is underway. Michigan's ongoing challenge with this important benchmark includes 37 percent of kids unable to read at a basic level and 71 percent not reading proficiently by the end of third grade – statistics that are far worse for students of color and students facing other learning and life challenges.

Being one of the lowest performing states in the nation, it is critical that Michigan puts the right plan into action and adequately funds the steps necessary to do so.

Fortunately, there is much to be learned from Florida's decades-long experience with mandatory retention.

A new study released in September unearthed a critical finding in Florida's early grade retention policy which, similar to Michigan's legislation, requires all students with reading skills below grade level to be retained in the third grade.



Michele Corey is vice president for programs at Michigan's Children, which promotes public policies that close equity gaps and help the state's most vulnerable children.

Researchers found the strongest predictor of retention was the educational attainment of students' mothers. Children whose mothers had less than a high school diploma were 14 percent more likely to be retained compared with children whose mothers had a bachelor's degree. In addition, children with well-educated mothers were more likely to be promoted based on subjective exemptions.

What can we learn from more experienced states on this issue?

That what we intuitively know is also borne out by experience and evidence — there is a link between the educational success of parents and that of their children. Research has consistently shown that the success of children is tied to that of their parents, with multiple studies showing that children with more educated parents have more literacy readiness.

Parent education, of course, has its ties to economic status, but it is also specifically tied to parental availability for, understanding of, and ability to advocate for their kids in educational (and other) settings.

Because of this, **Michigan's Children** has argued that third grade reading scores won't rise appreciatively unless parents are able to engage effectively in their children's learning. They are after all a package deal. Parents are a child's first and best teacher and the home is the first and continues to be the most influential "classroom" for a child's learning, view of the world, and ability to grasp success in life.

There are ways to make progress on this issue. Michigan's Children was successful in maintaining in our final legislation a requirement to collect information about barriers parents face to successfully completing the required "read at home" plans.

If Michigan is anything like Florida, which of course it is, those barriers will likely include low adult skill levels. Addressing those barriers will have to include a family literacy component. Considering that there are 42,000 adults in Michigan between the ages of 18-34 who have less than a ninth grade education, and that each year more than 15,000 babies are born in Michigan to mothers without a high school credential, one can predict that some parents of the poorer performing kids are themselves poorly educated, likely poorly employed and struggling to ably assist in their children's education.

A two-generation approach to literacy is what is required. Investment in family literacy must be part of the strategy to improving third grade reading scores. Adult education programs have suffered for decades over inadequate funding and as a result many good programs have closed their doors. Without opportunities for parents to get the educational help they need, how can they be expected to support their children's educational journey? Educational programs must become more accessible to adults who need them.

Another necessary strategy Michigan's Children successfully worked to include in the third grade reading legislation was an expansion of the participants in the read-at-home component to include caregivers beyond parents, like after-school providers.

Knowing the many challenges of working parents, particularly those struggling with their own literacy, and allowing other caregivers to contribute to the read-at-home plans is a sensible way to assist children's learning. Of course, this requires that children are spending time in quality child care settings outside of school where their education can be supported.

To improve on the numbers of schoolchildren who can read by the end of third grade, we need to invest inside the school building, but also outside – in family literacy, high-quality child care to prepare kids before they reach kindergarten, and high-quality afterschool and summer programs that can reduce the literacy gap through the early grades and beyond.

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8 comments from Bridge readers.

Carolyn

December 1, 2016 at 10:03 am

At one time I heard Tennessee had the whole state enrolled in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and used the health care providers to get the babies signed up. Imagination Library gives books every month from birth to age 5. Now they setup a foundation to help fund it and I don't know if they still have the healthcare workers help parents to sign up. Does Michigan have a website like Tennessee's <http://www.governorsfoundation.org/> with links to volunteer options (including getting teens to fund raise and signup people), activities to increase literacy at a young age, corporate sponsors, They show in the sponsoring link that each book is only a buck (\$12/yr. per child or \$60 for all 5 years/child). Literacy programs with a free book program might help some parents get that extra push. Shouldn't literacy be part of the state workforce training program(s) or a partner program with education?

Jerry

December 1, 2016 at 11:03 am

"We just need more money and everything will be fixed." I've heard that for decades and it has never been the solution for children, only adults.

Peter

December 1, 2016 at 1:49 pm

Jerry,

Instead of just reactionary naysaying, do you have any positive alternative solutions to offer? Did you actually read the article?

duane

December 2, 2016 at 12:07 am

Peter,

Are you willing to participate in a conversation about reading and learning?

"Parents are a child's first and best teacher..." why should we believe that? If that were true then "each year more than 15,000 babies are born in Michigan to mothers without a high school credential," means there are only 15,000 students that will fail reading in 3rd grade.

I offer a different possibility, it isn't about being taught to read at home, it is about being encouraged to read for fun and for learning, it is about being expected to read and to practice reading. Consider how that potentially the next Secretary of HUD was raised by a poor illiterate single mother in Detroit. I suspect that there are many students that struggle with reading who have high school graduate or college educated mothers and fathers [I actually know of some children who have had their father be active in their learning]. I wonder if you have consider the old adage 'you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.' I believe that if a student at any age does not have an interest in learning to read or any other subject they will not do what it takes to learn.

I am surprise that Ms. Corey hasn't considered parents that English is a second language it they speak it at all as another category of students at risk, as it would seem that if the mother struggles with the language they would be less likely to be able to teach. My grandparents could not speak English, my mother did not speak English until she went to school, and yet she learned to read, though she didn't earn her GED until she was in her 60s. I think rather than try to blame the mothers for a child's lack of skills there would be a better chance for improving reading skills and learning by focusing on how to get the student interested in reading/learning. Ms. Corey's approach simplifies the solution for it narrows the focus to the mothers. My approach is complex because it is focused on the individual students, and since each is unique it requires an individual solution for each student.

Do you recall your days in school and how students had different levels of success, do you recall a difference in attitudes in those students related to their learning success? I know I lacked interest in school and learning and was at best an average performing student, but when I did find a subject of interest my efforts and the results was above average. How about you, was your performance due to what your mother was teaching you at home or was it your interest in what was being taught in school?

Mary Pung

December 1, 2016 at 12:55 pm

Suggest the promotion of little free libraries throughout communities to make books more available to children and adults.

Bob Balwinski

December 1, 2016 at 2:40 pm

"each year more than 15,000 babies are born in Michigan to mothers without a high school credential"

Is it possible here that Michigan Right-To-Life members could adopt or see that these children are adopted by educated parents? The educational status of the mother, in particular, is the main indicator of children's success in school. I see that Right-To-Life members.....the educated mothers in particular.....could really answer the call for help with these children born but not about to be raised in a good educational setting.

Ben Washburn

December 1, 2016 at 2:54 pm

I have a much different kind of problem than Jerry with arguments calling for more money. It misleads most folks to believe that more money can be had, when in fact, it can not. And that misleads folks to wait for more money to materialize, rather than face-up to the hard truth of dealing with what can be done right now, with what little is available. I voted for Bernie, but less than 20% of Michigan's total voters did likewise. That means that not more than one in five voters would actually support paying higher taxes. Therefore, it's just never going to happen. Advocating for it is just another excuse for sitting on your hands, and doing nothing.

Mark

December 2, 2016 at 8:24 am

I would like to add to the discussion regarding inner cities, the theory of "comfortable poverty." We have had in Detroit five decades or more majority of babies born to unwed mothers already living in poverty. Very few break out of that cycle. It takes a strong determination and mentoring program to have any chance to succeed. You have single mothers that may occasionally get a seasonal part time job to supplement the government assistance; you have children getting

free breakfast & lunch at schools with many offering throughout the year. The amount of charitable programs of food, clothing and recreation are all available. So with that said, many don't put education as a priority. I don't mean to sound pessimistic, but there will be little change in academic performance regardless of funding programs unless there is a significant culture change. As a person that works with local universities, I just don't see things getting better with that demographic.

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