

The Third Grade Reading Benchmark: What It Means for Equity within the Birth through Third Grade Continuum

Education is a lifelong process that begins at birth – from cradle to career. The children of Michigan will be our future scientists, entrepreneurs, teachers, parents, laborers, artists and elected officials. With our next workforce set to be the most diverse yet, improving educational outcomes for all children, particularly children of color and children from low-income communities is critical to Michigan's future economic vitality.

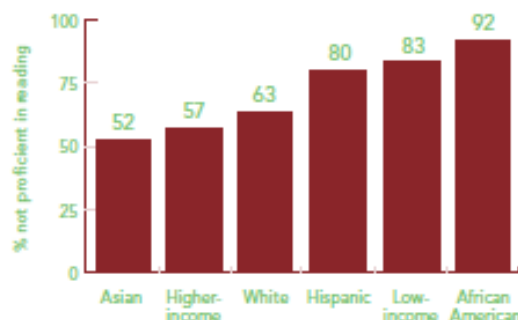
Disparities in child outcomes that begin at birth can continue to worsen as children grow older. Prevention and early intervention are critical to reduce racial and ethnic gaps in outcomes. Inequity in birth outcomes and literacy development result in differences in health and intellectual functioning, and is evident as early as nine months of age. This gap contributes to differences in school readiness, educational success, high school graduation and college enrollment, leading to clear disparities in lifetime earnings. Unless intentional action is taken, disparities will continue to grow in Michigan as the population becomes more diverse.

A key indicator that assists in understanding disparities in early childhood and can predict future outcomes in school success is the third grade reading benchmark, which is measured via standardized test in the fourth grade. Reading proficiently by the end of third grade can be a make-or-break benchmark in a child's educational development. Up until the end of third grade, most children are learning to read; and beginning in fourth grade, they are reading to learn. With nearly half of fourth grade textbooks of any subject requiring grade-level proficiency in reading, children who struggle to read will struggle in the classroom. Because of inadequate literacy resources to combat poor reading outcomes throughout later elementary and middle school, 75 percent of students who are poor readers in third grade will remain poor readers in high school.

Unfortunately in Michigan, many children – particularly children of color and low-income children – struggle to read proficiently by the end of third grade. Only three of every ten Michigan fourth-graders demonstrated reading proficiency on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress, the standard for measuring academic proficiency across the states. As Michigan's 2011 Kids Count Data Book clearly indicates, Hispanic/Latino, African American, and low-income children struggle the most to read proficiently by the end of third grade with only 8-20 percent reading proficiently by the end of third grade.

Fortunately, studies have shown that students who enter kindergarten with the literacy skills necessary for success will fare better; and early education programs have proven results to improve kindergarten readiness, particularly for children at-risk of school failure, effectively narrowing the achievement gap. With Michigan kindergarten teachers reporting that on average, only two out of three entering students are ready to learn, preparing children for school is a critical component to

The percentages of Michigan fourth-graders not proficient in reading are highest in communities of color and low-income families.



Source: The Nation's Report Card, Reading 2011 State Snapshot Report Michigan Grade 4

improving third grade literacy and long-term educational success. High quality early childhood education programs have demonstrated improvements in early language development and literacy. For example:

- Children who participated in Early Head Start – a community-based program for low-income families with infants and toddlers – scored higher on standardized measures of cognitive and language development at 24 and 36 months.
- Children who participated in Parents as Teachers – a parent education program featuring in-home visits with parents and children – were more advanced at age three in language, scored higher on kindergarten readiness tests, show better school readiness at the start of kindergarten, and achieve higher reading readiness at the end of kindergarten.
- Children who participated in the Great Start Readiness Program – Michigan’s preschool program for four-year-olds at-risk of school failure – had increased print awareness in kindergarten, had higher fourth grade reading test scores based on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program test, and were 85 percent more likely to graduate high school on time.

High quality early childhood programs show the greatest impact among children of color and children from low-income families. Many students who benefit from high quality early learning programs go on to achieve varying educational success in elementary schools. Ensuring that the components of high quality early childhood programs are consistently carried into the early elementary years can increase educational success. A seamless early childhood to early elementary educational experience for children and their families can ensure that gains made in early childhood can continue through K-12, reducing the achievement gap.

Key quality components of early childhood programs that can continue into elementary schools include:

- Activities and an environment that promote all domains of children’s development: cognitive, physical, social, emotional, language and literacy, and approaches to learning.
- Small group sizes and low child-to-provider ratios.
- Parent/family engagement and responsiveness to the needs and issues of parents /families.
- Culturally competent policies and practices.
- Developmental screenings at regular intervals.
- Linkages for families to health, mental health and other community supports.

For children who begin kindergarten without the tools they need to succeed, providing opportunities for students to catch-up in the early elementary years is vitally important to ensure all children can read proficiently by the end of third grade. Many programs such as high quality before- and after-school programming are important opportunities for young students to gain the literacy foundation they need to be on track in the early grades. Ensuring that options are available for students in the elementary years to get “on-track” is just as essential as high quality early education to ensure that more costly and more difficult remediation efforts later in the K-12 years – including grade retention – are unnecessary.

Going forward, policymakers are responsible for making informed decisions to ensure that Michigan children have opportunities to succeed in school and be prepared to enter the workforce. Third grade reading proficiency has huge ramifications in terms of educational success, and is a benchmark that can be achieved for all students by having access to high quality early education programs that transition to high quality early elementary schools. The future of Michigan’s economy depends on a skilled workforce, and equitable public policies that help to reduce the achievement gap and better prepare all students for educational success are key components.