

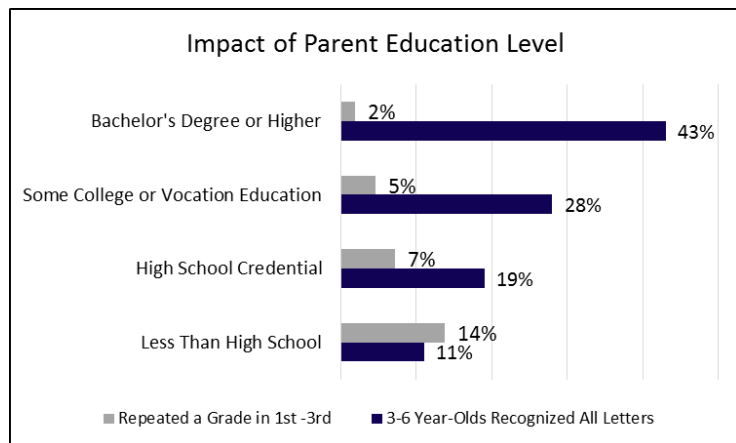


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## Family Literacy: Equipping Parents and Children with Literacy Skills for Lifelong Success

Much attention has been placed on ensuring more young children are reading proficiently by the end of third grade. While research has consistently shown the impact of parental education on children's education success, little focus has been placed on the role of family literacy within the third grade reading context. Family literacy is a two generation education strategy that provides classes for adults to improve their literacy skills while also providing literacy rich opportunities for their children through high quality child care and other early childhood education opportunities.

Why Parents' Education Matters: The efforts to improve third grade reading scores will not happen without parents engaging in their children's learning. However, when 42,000 Michiganders ages 18-34 have less than a ninth grade education, an assumption cannot be made about parents' ability to engage in their children's learning.<sup>1</sup> Research has consistently shown the impact of parental education on children's success in school and in life; after all, the child's first school is the home, and their first teachers are their parents. Multiple studies have shown that children with more educated parents have more literacy readiness skills and greater education success. One study showed that three- to six-year-old children not yet enrolled in kindergarten whose parents had completed some college or a vocational program were 3 times more likely to recognize letters, a universally accepted pre-cursor to reading, than those with parents who had not completed high school. The difference grew with each additional post-secondary degree earned by parents.<sup>2</sup> Another study demonstrated the relationship between parents' education attainment and likelihood of a child being retained in kindergarten-third grade, again showing the importance of parent education and their child's education success.<sup>3</sup>



Family Literacy in Michigan: From 1988 to 2010 the federal Even Start program provided grants to local organizations to provide family literacy programming to families most in need – typically families with less income and less educational attainment than families receiving Head Start services. Even Start grantees offered year-round family literacy services that incorporated early childhood education, adult literacy (adult basic and secondary-level education and instruction for English language learners), parenting education, and interactive parent-child literacy activities.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey, 2011-2013 three-year estimates.

<sup>2</sup> Child Trends. <http://www.childtrends.org>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

### **Focus on Michigan Communities**

Wayne Metropolitan Community Action Agency

Literacy Education and Parenting Success (LEAPS) is a family literacy program run by the Wayne Metropolitan Community Action Agency that aims to improve literacy skills of parents and their children. This program serves income eligible parents and their children ages 6 months to 8 years by pairing adult education opportunities, such as GED classes and English as a second language instruction, with free high quality early childhood education opportunities through Head Start, the Great Start Readiness Program, or a high quality child care program. Previously supported through the federal Even Start program, LEAPS is now supported with some federal Community Services Block Grant funding as well as support from the Barbara Bush Foundation.

Learn more about LEAPS by visiting [www.waynemetro.org/LEAPS](http://www.waynemetro.org/LEAPS).

Data collected from Michigan's Even Start grantees demonstrated the power of family literacy to improve children's kindergarten readiness and third grade reading scores. Children in families who participated in Even Start could identify at least 10 upper case letters, and demonstrated age-appropriate oral communication skills upon kindergarten entry. In addition, 75 percent of children who participated in Even Start were reading at the appropriate level in third grade.<sup>4</sup>

After Even Start was defunded, communities around Michigan have pieced together other resources to maintain more limited family literacy programming without dedicated, consistent public resource. While there are other public funding streams that may include family literacy as a component of their service provision, there is no dedicated public resource at the state or federal level similar to the former Even Start investment to support family literacy, despite its importance and success.

Fund Family Literacy in Michigan: Investment in family literacy must be included in a third grade reading plan that furthers the educational attainment and skill-building of parents, while providing opportunities for them to learn alongside their children. Now is the time to capitalize on the commitment to support children's literacy development early, and the extraordinary public and private partnerships that have been maintained and created in communities around the state to include parents in that literacy development. Public commitment of resources can ensure that the family literacy opportunities currently available to a small number of children and families are consistent and sustainable all over the state. Furthermore, ensuring families have access to income support and that family literacy programs can support parents with consistent and reliable child care while participating in adult education programs is essential. Focusing on the needs of the whole family will lead to results – more Michigan third graders reading proficiently.

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<sup>4</sup> Michigan Department of Education.