

Coalition: More funding needed to help kids reach reading standards

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Living in temporary housing, not knowing where or when your next meal is coming. These are examples of poverty educators say can stunt a child's educational growth so greatly it could lead to academic futility — and one day, even to their incarceration.

Oakland County remains fifth in the state in regards to child well-being, according to a study by Kids Count in Michigan, which is part of a national effort to gauge children's welfare. The percentage of Michigan children living in poverty, however, has increased dramatically since the recent economic recession.

“We're in the fourth year of the economic recovery,” Kids Count Michigan project director Jane Zehnder-Merrell said. “It's troubling we're not seeing child poverty decrease.”

Educators say conditions of poverty can heap stress on young children, which detracts from attention paid to academics, ultimately leading to poor performance in the classroom at a critical age.

“It's a huge issue,” said Joan Firestone, director of early childhood at Oakland Schools. “They're worried about survival. ... That's what their world has become.

“It would be very nice if all we had to worry about was getting kids to learn their letters and numbers.”

A woeful lack of school readiness can, among other things, lead to children being misdiagnosed by educators.

“High numbers of kids seem like they are in need of special education because their development is so far behind,” Firestone said. “We're not talking about kids who need help reading a letter or two.”

The county has seen success through early education programs for at-risk children, though.

Oakland Schools works with Great Start Readiness, a state-funded home visit program serving more than 3,000 kids. The program has an 80 percent success rate in the first year, Firestone said.

“That gives us an opportunity to see what's going on,” she said.

Fight Crime reports that children enrolled in the program are less likely to be held back in school and more likely to graduate high school than those not in the program.

But waiting until high school to intervene is much too late to make a difference, officials warn.

“(It) can only make a modicum of difference,” said Eric Davis, vice president of community impact for the United Way of Southeastern Michigan.

Third-grade reading plan

Proponents of increased funding for educational programs helping disadvantaged children are hoping Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder’s planned earmark of nearly \$50 million for programs come to fruition.

“We know if we have more resources ... those children are going to get (to) kindergarten and take advantage of reading instruction,” Firestone said. “We can have the most impact when kids are young. ... It’s too late to wait for older years.”

The ultimate goal of a coalition backing Snyder’s birth-to-third-grade reading plan is to see children improve reading scores by the third grade — a benchmark where educators believe students begin to transition their reading to a comprehensive fashion.

“From fourth grade on, you need to be able to (retain information) to learn,” said Matt Gillard, president of Michigan’s Children.

Aspects of Snyder’s approach to improved reading proficiency include:

- Parent coaching and support through home visits
- Early intervention funding increase for children with developmental delays or disability
- Extending the Great Start Readiness Preschool Program to include three-year-old children
- Field testing for kindergarten entry assessment beginning in 2016-17 school year
- Diagnostic tools to monitor development of K-3 reading skills and literacy
- Creating family literacy programs
- Doubling the income threshold to exit child care subsidy eligibility

Poverty ‘not just an urban problem’

Officials say the consequence of not providing funding to programs such as home visits can also lead to higher incarceration rates, which end up costing taxpayers in the future.

The state spends \$2 billion each year to incarcerate its felons, according to Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, a non-partisan organization comprised of law enforcement leaders and crime survivors. Only four percent of those prisoners under the age of 20 have achieved a high school diploma, according to the organization.

“We’ve heard experts say what’s needed in education ... (but) we’re the ones mopping up on the other end,” said Auburn Hills Police Chief Doreen Olko. “We cannot keep incarcerating as many young people as we do. Just locking people up is not the solution.”

Olko said some families end up with generations of members in the criminal justice system, where a lack of education is a significant factor.

Poverty isn't just limited to families living in big cities, Olko noted.

"It's not just an urban problem," she said. "There's tremendous suburban poverty."

Proposal 1's effect on education funding

[Proposal 1](#) seeks to increase the state sales tax to seven percent, among a number of other actions. If approved May 5, the measure would [generate an estimated \\$200 million](#) in new money for public schools each year.

Conversely, if Proposal 1 fails, education funding could be cut further, advocates of Snyder's proposed funding say.

"We'll be hard-pressed to talk about new programs if Proposal 1 doesn't pass," Gillard said.

Dedicated funding and that created by Proposal 1 would both be needed to return the state to its former funding levels, Firestone said.

"We're so far behind where we used to be," she said.

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