



Muskegon County leaders highlight need for increased third-grade reading proficiency in Gov. Snyder's 2016 budget

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Students in Andrea Beverwyk's third grade class, raise their hands to answer a question at Three Oaks Public School Academy in Muskegon on Jan. 29, 2015. Three Oaks, a K-5 elementary school, scored very high in Bridge Magazine's achievement analysis that takes into consideration socioeconomic status. (*Andraya Croft | MLive.com*)

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MUSKEGON, MI - A group of Muskegon County leaders in the fields of education, human services and law enforcement are making a push to increase literacy in the community, particularly in elementary age children.

The leaders came together Monday, March 23 at the MLive Muskegon Chronicle offices in downtown Muskegon, as well as stops in Grand Rapids and Holland, in an effort to recognize a statewide and countywide problem in literacy. The group presented a series of figures and statistics in their respective fields, highlighting education and how it ties into poverty, healthcare, employment and incarceration statistics.

Chiefly, their position is a call to action to state legislators that there's work to be done - both statewide and here at home in Muskegon County.

The partnership comes on the heels of Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder's fiscal year 2016 spending budget. Snyder **proposed a \$54 billion spending budget in February** calling for additional **investments in K-12 schools**, higher education and skilled trades training, among others.

A significant part of Snyder's budget focuses on third grade reading proficiency, as it's believed that reading proficiently by the end of third grade is a benchmark in the education development of children.

The 2016 fiscal year begins Oct. 1 and Snyder will look to finalize the budget by summer.

The local leadership during Monday's meeting included:

- Christine Robere, President and CEO of United Way of the Lakeshore, Muskegon
- Dean Roesler, Muskegon County Sheriff
- D.J. Hilson, Muskegon County Prosecutor
- Jeff Lewis, Muskegon Director of Public Safety
- Laura Fitzpatrick, Manager of Advocacy and Community Benefit at Mercy Health Muskegon
- Stuart Jones, Director of Early Childhood Services at Muskegon ISD

Also in attendance Monday were Jane Zehnder-Merrell, Kids Count in Michigan Project Director, Michigan League for Public Policy; Matt Gillard, President and CEO of Michigan's Children; Major General Gerald Miller, U.S. Army (retired) in Grand Rapids; and K.P. Pelleran, State Director for the Council for a Strong America Michigan.

According to the Kids Count in Michigan Data Profile 2015, 23 percent of Muskegon County students in the class of 2013 did not graduate on time, an 8 percent improvement from 2007, but still 73rd out of 81 Michigan counties.

The same set of statistics indicate that Muskegon County is ranked 63rd of 81 counties in fourth-graders MEAP reading proficiency with 30 percent measuring as not proficient - a number the group believes can be combated through increased education at a younger age.

Roesler, Lewis and Hilson each stressed the benefits of stronger educational programs from a law enforcement perspective, believing education has the proven effect in making people more employable and helps keep them out of prison.

Lewis cited Wilder Research data indicating that there's an estimated lifetime economic value of \$47,104 in Michigan in investing in a child at risk of academic failure. That number more than doubles in the city of Detroit with the value set at \$96,536.

The leadership highlighted several components of Snyder's third grade reading plan Monday including Early On, which serves 18,000 families with children up to age 3 with developmental delays or disabilities; literacy coaches and parent coaching and support through home visiting; Great Start Readiness Preschool Program for 3-year-olds; and expanded learning opportunities for K-3rd graders.

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