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Guest commentary

Improving third-grade reading isn't enough

16 June 2015

by Mina Hong

Governor Snyder's Third Grade Reading Workgroup recently released its recommendations to improve Michigan's lagging third-grade reading scores. While almost every other state has seen reading proficiency rise, Michigan's reading proficiency has steadily declined for the past 12 years. This troubling trend is even worse for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students struggling with other big challenges like homelessness – all of whom are falling even more behind in their reading abilities.

For the academic success of all children and our state's prosperity, we must do better.

To this end, **Michigan's Children** is pleased to see much-needed, statewide attention on this critical benchmark for children's learning. Failing to read proficiently by the end of third grade will lead to continued struggles in the classroom and long-term implications for students' educational success.

The Third Grade Reading Workgroup provides a series of recommendations focused on the following strategies:

- Identifying students who need reading support and then providing appropriate interventions
- Ensuring teachers have the tools they need to provide adequate literacy instruction



Mina Hong is the senior policy analyst for Michigan's Children where she specializes in issues impacting young children and their families. Michigan's Children is a statewide independent voice working to ensure public policies are made in the best interest of all children –from cradle to career – and their families and focuses on reducing disparities in child outcomes.
(courtesy photo)

- Giving parents the information they need to support their children's literacy
- Implementing a smart promotion strategy for kids as their learning progresses
- Having adequate data to track our state's success

It's timely that many of these strategies are supported by new investments in the state's fiscal year 2015-2016 education omnibus budget that the Legislature approved last week.

However, we must point out that the Workgroup's recommendations don't go far enough, particularly in assisting the most challenged students. To build upon the **Workgroup's recommendations**, we should consider the following:

Let's start with the focus on parents. We know that gaps in early literacy can emerge as early as nine months of age and that parents are responsible for their children's early learning skills. The Workgroup's recommendations identify **parent coaching and support** through home visits and parent-child classes as great tools to assist parents in their child's development.

But what can we do for the parents who struggle to read? Young learners will face more literacy hardships if their parents cannot support them through their reading journey. For this purpose, the state's \$3 million expansion in adult education for FY2016 is a necessary step towards addressing parent support and early literacy, which Michigan's Children applauds. And, we need more and better investments that **support two-generation family literacy programs** to effectively increase literacy for both parents and their children if we want to see ongoing improvements to the state's third grade reading scores.

Additionally, Michigan needs to better support kids and families served by **Early On**. Early On provides parents of infants and toddlers who have developmental delays or disabilities with early intervention services and tools to help their young children's development. Adequate services can help many children develop skills at a level equal to their peers by age three. In fact, 40 percent of infants and toddlers who receive appropriate early intervention services do not need special education at preschool and kindergarten entry.

It's clear that **Early On makes a huge difference** in child development, but Michigan continues to be in the minority of states that fails to invest in Early On, leaving many students trailing when they enter kindergarten. This must change.

A huge step in the right direct is the inclusion of a \$17.5 million initiative in FY2016 to provide additional learning time for students in grades K-3 who lack reading skills. But, for these funds to have the greatest impact, they must be applied to best-practices modeled by the federally funded **21st Century Community Learning Centers Program** designed for high-poverty, low-performing schools. Through partnerships with schools and community-based groups, it provides enhanced before-school, after-school and summer-learning opportunities that have proven to increase student performance in reading and math, increase student participation and engagement in their education, and promote students' development in other areas needed for success

in school and life.

We must take advantage of the governor and legislature's focus to improve literacy by building upon that momentum to ensure that all Michigan children are reading proficiently. Won't you join us in those efforts?

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5 comments from Bridge readers.

Chuck Fellows

June 16, 2015 at 10:38 am

How if we support and publicize our libraries instead of reducing their funding and shifting the Michigan Library from an independent agency to a sub within the Department of Education, you know the agency that oversees schools and is watching media specialists and school libraries disappear.

Nope, instead of reinforcing the expert resources we already have, reduce their funding, reduce their staffing and create a brand new program blessed by the Governor.

And by the way, since when does the opinion of adults, expert and lay, overrule biology. Every child learns at a different rate and a different way. Forcing children to fit a preconceived notion of mastery according to a calendar timeline is really stupid, as well as harmful to the child's emotional and cognitive development.

It's time the adults in the room grew up.

Chuck Jordan

June 16, 2015 at 10:49 am

All the help we can give to parents the better, but there is nothing magical about 3rd grade. Children do not all learn and develop at the same time. One size fits all programs can do more harm than good. Pushing and pressuring kids to learn when they are not ready can cause more harm than good. What kids need are more fun and games, tactile learning, making reading fun.

Duane

June 17, 2015 at 12:48 am

Ms. Hong says nothing about the child/student's role in their learning to read. Has she or the other proponents made the effort to talk to the students about their reading? Have they asked the successful readers how and why they succeeded? Have they listened?

I am concerned that the children/students are simply an [excuse] reason for spending on adult [written by, administered by, implemented by adults] programs that continually fail to meet claims.

Why doesn't anyone talk to the students and include what they learn in discussions about programs/spending claimed to be for the students?

Wayne O'Brien

June 17, 2015 at 9:31 am

When state money may be spent on still more state educational programs, it is crucial to question everything....beginning with underlying assumptions. Why speak in medical field "diagnose and treat" metaphors? Is there actually underlying disease and if so do we actually have proven treatment options? "Smart promotion"; ominous sounding what this might mean one can only guess but it appears likely that the concept will be tied to the rising tide of ever increasing time and heartbeat-wasting testing....as opposed to ever more effective teaching (highly developed pedagogy) and actual student success when compared to world-wide educational success agents like the educators in Finland.

What did the Finns do that is different from Hong's (workgroup) proposals? Almost everything! "For the academic success of all children", the Finns made certain that ALL CHILDREN in Finland are taught by highly-effective and exceedingly well prepared teachers, each with a masters degree emphasizing pedagogy, the art, craft and science of teaching. They eliminate this silly "smart promotion" concept by leveraging each teacher's social capital to optimize student learning with increasingly informed and skillful instruction. Students remain with the same teacher for four to six years. Students are taught what they are most ready to learn at the best time for them because the highly-prepared teachers have a long-time relationship with each of their students. None of this silly "smart promotion" for them because it is not part of their successful system! The need and expense of formally gathering "adequate" data is obviated. Teachers informally assess their students moment-to-moment....the best way for optimizing teaching and learning. So this Hong proposal is based on very, very speculative and outdated thinking on the best way to educate children....it focuses on outdated "programmatic thinking". This method of "planning" typically seeks to develop another program to "splice" into an ill-functioning collection of already disjointed educational programs. This is not what the Finns did when they planned their exemplary educational services to children and parents. The Finns successfully used "systems" thinking to plan a well functioning system from the start.....the Hong workgroup needs to study the Finns and systems thinking and then get back to the governor with a plan that is more in-line with what the best in the world are doing to educate their children.

Duane

June 17, 2015 at 11:13 pm

Wayne,

I notice you place no weight on the cultural influence on the children [wants to learn]. Could it be that the culture has a greater personal influence on whether the student learns than any administrative system in any country? If the student lacks an interest in learning even in the Finn's system the student would fail.

Is the Finnish culture about learning different than in the US or in segments of the US? Could culture have an impact as it seems to other regions of the world?

Think of yourself, did you learn because you wanted to learn or was it because the system managing the educational process made you learn?