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Annie E. Casey Foundation Releases New Report *Early Reading Proficiency in the United States*

Low reading scores show majority of U.S. children not prepared for future success with major achievement gaps between low- and higher-income students

Rhode Island made one of the biggest gains in reading proficiency in the nation but continues to have one of the largest achievement gaps between low- and higher-income students

Providence, RI (January 28, 2014) – The national Annie E. Casey Foundation released a report, [*Early Reading Proficiency in the United States*](#), highlighting fourth grade reading proficiency rates over a ten-year period in the United States. Data from the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP) revealed that all but six states have made progress in improving reading proficiency rates from 2003 to 2013. Despite this improvement, two-thirds of all children in the United States are still not reading proficiently by the time they reach fourth grade.

The biggest gains in reading proficiency were in Rhode Island, Maryland, and the District of Columbia. In 2003, 71% of Rhode Island fourth graders were reading below proficiency as measured by the NAEP. By 2013, this percentage had improved by 13% (or 9 percentage points) and 62% were reading below proficiency.

“This is good news for Rhode Island – this national Data Snapshot shows that Rhode Island is one of two states in the nation, along with the District of Columbia, with the biggest gains in fourth grade reading proficiency over the past ten years. Reading proficiently by fourth grade is a key indicator of a student’s future educational and economic success,” said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT.

Achievement gaps

Despite an improvement over the last decade in reading proficiency in many states, large gaps exist among racial minorities and economic classes. *Early Reading Proficiency in the United States* finds that disparities remain in reading proficiency levels between Black (83 percent not proficient), Latino (81 percent) and American Indian/Alaska Native (78 percent) children and their White (55 percent) and Asian/Pacific Islander (49 percent) peers. Dual language learners are among the least likely to hit this important milestone. Nationally, the gap between students from low- and higher-income families widened, with a 17 percent improvement seen among higher-income children, compared to a 6 percent improvement among their lower-income peers.

Rhode Island mirrors this national trend in having large achievement gaps among children of varying income groups. In 2013, 81% of low-income fourth graders were reading below proficiency as measured by the NAEP, compared to 45% of higher-income fourth graders. Rhode Island’s achievement gap between low- and higher-income students is among the largest in the nation.

Elizabeth Burke Bryant said, “These positive gains in Rhode Island’s overall reading proficiency provide important momentum for the continued urgent work to close Rhode Island’s significant achievement gap in reading proficiency between low- and higher-income students. We need to ensure that all children are proficient in reading by the end of third grade.”

Why 4th grade reading proficiency is critical

The Foundation has documented in [Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters](#) and [Early Warning Confirmed](#) the need to focus on reading proficiency by the end of third grade as an essential step toward increasing the number of children who succeed academically and do well in life. Research from the reports found that children who read proficiently by the end of third grade are more likely to graduate from high school, are less likely to fall into poverty, and are more likely to find a job that can adequately support their families.

Early Reading Proficiency in the United States recommends that more must be done to increase reading proficiency for low-income children so that they can attain economic security as adults: use results-driven solutions to transform low-performing schools into high-quality learning environments; make sure that communities are supported to ensure children come to school ready, attend school every day and maintain and expand their learning during the summer months; and develop a system of early care and education that coordinates what children experience from birth through age eight.

“Reading is critical for all children,” said Ralph Smith, senior vice president of the Casey Foundation and managing director of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. “It is unacceptable to have a gap in reading proficiency rates between low-income and high-income children increase by nearly 20 percent over the last decade. We must do more to improve reading proficiency among all kids while focusing attention on children in lower-income families who face additional hurdles of attending schools that have high concentrations of kids living in poverty.”

“Rhode Island is focusing attention on the key strategies we know improve early reading proficiency, including improving access to high-quality early learning programs, reducing chronic absence in the early grades, and enhanced literacy strategies targeted to struggling readers,” said Bryant. “We must continue to focus our attention and resources on these issues because we all know how important early reading proficiency is to a child’s future success and to the economic success of our state.”

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The NAEP and the NECAP

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) measures proficiency nationally and across states every year. The New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) is Rhode Island’s statewide assessment system and measures proficiency in Rhode Island and across districts and is administered every year. NECAP data for 2013 will be publicly released on January 30-31, 2014.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children’s policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation’s children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit www.aecf.org.

Fourth Grade Reading Proficiency in the United States features the latest data for states, the District of Columbia and the nation, as does the Casey Foundation’s KIDS COUNT Data Center, which is home to comprehensive national, state and local statistics on child well-being. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, launched in May 2010, is a collaborative effort of funders, nonprofit partners, states and more than 140 communities across the nation to ensure that many more children from low-income families succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, a career and active citizenship.