



Rhode Island KIDS COUNT

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For Immediate Release

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Two out of three fourth graders attending public schools in Rhode Island (64%) and nationally (68%) are not proficient in reading.

Four out of five fourth graders from low-income families across the U.S. and in Rhode Island are not proficient in reading.

The gap in language development between low-income children and their higher-income peers begins as early as the first year of life.

Providence, RI, June 2, 2010 - More than 50 community leaders attended a policy roundtable event hosted by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT to release a new *National KIDS COUNT Special Report* from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Entitled "*Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*," the report is a call to action to improve the proportion of children reading proficiently by the end of third grade. The policy roundtable event was held on **Wednesday, June 2, 2010 from 10:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.** at One Union Station, Providence, RI.

Participants at the event reviewed the findings for Rhode Island and discussed strategies that can improve reading proficiency for all children in Rhode Island. Until the end of third grade, most children are *learning to read*. Beginning in fourth grade, they are *reading to learn*. The report highlights the factors that undermine reading proficiency, recognizes that gaps begin at birth and issues a call to action for government leaders, community leaders, schools and families.

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, stated, "Rhode Island has made important strides to strengthen our early learning and public education systems so that all students have the opportunity to receive a world-class education. Yet, we can dramatically accelerate our progress by aligning our resources from birth through third grade in order to ensure that all children can read proficiently. The inability to read leads to poor school performance, lack of engagement in school, teen pregnancy, juvenile crime and dropping out."

According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 64% of Rhode Island fourth graders scored below the proficient level in reading. Rhode Island was one of only three states to improve significantly on the NAEP, advancing from 31% of fourth graders proficient in reading in 2007 to 36% proficient in 2009, 5 points above the national average.

"With 64% of our 4th graders reading at a level below proficiency, we can all agree that we need to do much more to improve literacy in our early grades," said Deborah A. Gist, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education. "We must work to ensure that every child has access to early-learning experiences that are rich in language instruction, that all students have excellent teachers in the early grades and throughout their school careers, and that every school in Rhode Island prepares all students for success."

Nationally, four out of five fourth graders from low-income families across the U.S. and in Rhode Island are not proficient in reading. Differences in language development between low-income children and their more affluent peers begin as early as the first year of life. Vocabulary development by age 3 has been found to predict reading achievement in third grade. When they enter kindergarten, children from low-income families are typically 12 to 14 months behind national norms in language and pre-reading skills. Achievement gaps can widen over time when children attend low-performing schools, are frequently absent from school, lose learning gains over the summer, and are exposed to chronic stress associated with poverty, hunger, inadequate and unstable housing, and family mobility.

Researchers attribute the differences in early language development to the differences in family resources and learning opportunities for children. Children from low-income families have a higher incidence of health problems that interfere with learning, have fewer early experiences and interactions that foster language development, and are less likely to participate in high-quality early childhood and pre-K programs. The “preparation gap” apparent at school entry, often persists as an “achievement gap” throughout the student’s school experience.

“We owe it to all of our students to ensure that they are on track for academic success,” said Providence Schools Superintendent Thomas M. Brady. “Research tells us that fourth grade reading skills are an indicator closely tied to future achievement, in middle school, high school and beyond. We must intervene early and effectively to help our children succeed.”

Although NAEP scores have shown incremental increases over the past 15 years for most students, disparities in reading achievement persist across racial and ethnic groups. The percentage of Black, Hispanic, and Asian fourth grade students in Rhode Island who score below proficient on the NAEP reading test is much higher (83%, 86%, and 70%, respectively) than the share of White students (56%). These disparities are also apparent in the national data.

“Poor reading test scores are profoundly disappointing to all of us who see school success and high school graduation as beacons in the battle against intergenerational poverty. The ability to read is central to children’s success in school, life-long earning potential, and their ability to contribute to the nation’s economy and its security,” stated Ralph Smith, Executive Vice President of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “When kids are not reading by fourth grade, they almost certainly get on a glide path to poverty.”

Recognizing these and other challenges, the *National KIDS COUNT Special Report, Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters* report has identified four steps to close educational achievement gaps and raise the bar for all children:

1. **Develop a coherent system of early care and education** that aligns, integrates, and coordinates what happens from birth through third grade so children are ready to take on the learning tasks associated with fourth grade and beyond.
2. **Encourage and enable parents, families, and caregivers** to play their indispensable roles as co-producers of good outcomes for their children.
3. **Prioritize, support, and invest in results-driven initiatives to transform low-performing schools into high-quality teaching and learning environments** in which all children, including those from low-income families and high-poverty neighborhoods, are present, engaged, and educated to high standards.

4. ***Develop and utilize solutions to two of the most significant contributors*** to the under-achievement of children from low-income families - ***chronic absence*** from school and ***summer learning loss***.

The report also includes data on key factors in child development that need to be considered as strategies are developed to increase the proportion of children who read at grade level by the end of the third grade.

- **Babies born low-birthweight:** 8.0% in Rhode Island, compared with 8.2% in the U.S. as a whole.
- **Children ages three to five not enrolled in nursery schools, preschool or kindergarten:** 34% in Rhode Island, compared with 39% in the U.S. as a whole.
- **Children ages one to five whose family members read to them fewer than three days per week:** 13% in Rhode Island, compared with 16% in the U.S. as a whole.
- **Children in households where the household head is not a high school graduate:** 15% in Rhode Island, compared with 16% in the U.S. as a whole.

Bryant remarked, “We know what needs to be done to ensure that all children have the opportunity to start life with the tools to be lifelong readers. We must do what it takes to make sure that every child enters school with the social-emotional, cognitive, literacy, and physical skills they need to succeed. We must work to close the gaps that begin before birth, widen in early childhood and too often continue to grow in the K-3 years.”

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