



# **THIRD GRADE READING PROFICIENCY: The Ticket to Education Excellence and a Strong Workforce**

## *An Idaho Business for Education Position Paper*

Educators will tell you that from early childhood to third grade children **learn to read** and from fourth grade on they **read to learn**. The trouble is too few students in Idaho reach the fourth grade ready to read.

That deficiency makes them more likely to drop-out of school, fail to go on to post-secondary education and get stuck in low-wage jobs. The sad truth is that some states even predict their future prison needs by how many third grade students can't read.

**Idaho Business for Education believes that every child has a right to read and that it is the responsibility of all the adults in their lives to make sure they do.**

As Ralph Smith of the Annie E. Casey Foundation says, "We will never close the achievement gap, we will never solve our dropout crisis, we will never break the cycle of poverty that afflicts so many children if we don't make sure that all our students learn to read."

In Idaho, 32 percent of all third grade students were Below Basic in reading as tested by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2013. Only one third were at or above Proficient. That compares to Massachusetts, the most proficient reading state, where half of all students were at Proficient or above and only 17 percent were Below Basic.

The reading proficiency problem is even more acute among low-income and minority students. In 2011, National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) data shows that 43 percent of Idaho's low-income students were not reading at grade level by fourth grade. It was worse for Hispanic kids – 54 percent had below basic proficiency.

Studies show that there are many reasons students do not become proficient readers by the fourth grade. But here are the five main areas that need attention if we are ever to raise the reading proficiency scores in Idaho:

- Early childhood education and kindergarten
- Reducing chronic absenteeism
- Reducing summer learning loss
- Teacher and administrator education and effectiveness
- Assessing student reading proficiency early, diagnosing problems and intervening to help struggling students.

**It is important to state from the outset: IBE cannot address all of these critical issues. Many of them must be addressed by child-advocacy and other non-profit community groups and by professional educators. But there are ways that IBE can make progress on some of these issues through the policy arena and by collaborating with other stakeholders.**

**Yet it is important for our IBE members to know that many issues contribute to our reading deficiency issue. This paper is intended to give you a good overview of the problem and suggest some changes to improve reading proficiency.**

Let's consider each of these factors and what can be done to change what we are doing so every child learns how to read.

## **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

We know that kids develop their "brain architecture" early in life. That's why parental involvement is so important because a parent is a child's first teacher and strongest supporter. Studies show that parents who read to their children, start to identify vocabulary words and connect them to images are more likely to have children who are ready to read when they enter school. **Idaho needs to make sure parents understand the importance of helping their child read and look for ways to give them the support to do so.**

But clearly parental support isn't enough or we would have better reading scores than we do. In a majority of Idaho families both parents work outside the home and often do not have the time, resources or skill to help teach their children how to read. This means parents and children must have access to affordable and high-quality pre-school and kindergarten programs with well-trained teachers who have the skills to teach reading.

**In 2011, 44 percent of Idaho's incoming kindergarten students were not ready to read.** One in five children entering kindergarten can't identify more than three letters of the alphabet.

Part of the problem is only 33 percent of Idaho's 3-4 year olds are enrolled in any type of pre-school - ranking Idaho 45th in the country in this category. Compounding the problem is that Idaho is one of only 10 states with half-day, voluntary kindergarten. That makes it very difficult for many parents - especially those of limited income - to enroll their children in kindergarten. The result is that children not enrolled in kindergarten lose 25 percent of their learning opportunity in the crucial four years where children learn to read before fourth grade.

A study published in the American Journal of Education showed that students enrolled in high-quality, full-day kindergarten were more likely to be ready for first grade than children in half-day kindergarten, regardless of family income, parental education or school characteristics.

Idaho should expand its programs to offer affordable and effective pre-school education to any parent who wants it and full-day kindergarten to all Idaho students. But so far Idaho policymakers have been reluctant to move in this direction.

If policymakers do not provide quality pre-school programs or full-day kindergarten to all parents who voluntarily want it, they should at least consider offering full-day kindergarten with a targeted reading program to students who don't enter kindergarten prepared to read. We must reach these students before they fall even further behind.

While we are at it we should be aware that other states are recognizing the importance of early childhood education. In May 2013 the National Governors Association reported that 39 states now support state-funded pre-kindergarten programs for more than 1.3 million children. That is nearly double the number of children served 10 years ago.

## **CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM**

Another problem is “chronic absenteeism” which is defined as students who miss 10 percent or more of the school year for whatever reason. National studies show that one in 10 kindergarten and first graders fall into this category. It is even higher among low-income children.

### **Students who are not present to learn are not learning.**

This problem can be addressed by identifying the students who are chronically absent, determining why they are absent and working with educators, parents, the community and even the courts to address the problem.

In Oregon, studies show that about 15 percent of the state’s first graders and more than 20 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders were chronically absent. Armed with that information, Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber told every school to come up with a plan to solve the problem.

Significantly, the Idaho Department of Education does not track chronic absenteeism. That is left to the individual districts. This means there is no single repository of information that can indicate whether we have a chronic absentee problem, how extensive it is or where we need to focus our attention. We need to change that if we are ever to address this issue.

Chronic absenteeism can be fixed. All we have to do is get serious about the problem, track it and develop measurable goals to address it.

## **SUMMER LEARNING LOSS**

In 2009, 83 percent of all kindergarteners in Idaho were reading at grade level when they finished in the spring. When they returned for first grade in the fall that number had dropped to 67 percent. It was just as bad for subsequent grades. Seventy-three percent of second graders were reading at grade level in the spring of 2011. When they started third grade that had dropped to 62 percent.

Summer reading loss is especially acute among low-income students who don’t have the books and other resources necessary to keep up their reading skills. The Campaign for Grade-level Reading estimates that students from low-income families lose as much as three months of reading comprehension over the summer. By the 5<sup>th</sup> grade they are nearly three grade levels behind their peers, even though many read at the same rate during the school year.

This is an especially alarming statistic considering that in Idaho nearly **50 percent** of our students come from low-income families.

We have some very good summer reading programs. Unfortunately, for many complicated reasons the students who need these programs the most are the ones who don’t or can’t access them. That often leads to actually increasing the reading gap between low-income students and their peers.

One solution is to focus on ways to provide more summer reading opportunities to low-income students and those who are not reading at grade level at the end of the school year. Communities can help address this problem by ensuring that organizations like the YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers, Big Sisters and libraries are equipped to promote reading.

But we may need **a change in state policy** that makes summer reading programs available – maybe even mandatory - for all students who are struggling to read at grade level in kindergarten, first, second and third grades. Florida has done that for students who are not reading at grade level by third grade and at least one study indicates it helped increase their reading proficiency.

## **TEACHER AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR EFFECTIVENESS**

Besides the parents, teachers are the most important factor in whether students learn. This may be especially true when it comes to reading proficiency. Idaho Kids Count reports that students placed with a high-performing teacher progress three times faster than those with low-performing teachers.

Idaho's Education Colleges and the State Department of Education should reevaluate how prospective teachers learn to teach reading. The adoption of the Idaho Core Standards, which raise the bar for language arts, provides a good reason to do this. Those standards will make it even more difficult for students struggling to read to keep up, all the more reason for strengthening teaching methods.

Additionally, the state also needs to make sure that veteran teachers are getting the ongoing training, feedback and support to enhance their reading teaching skills.

But teachers are not the only ones who can positively influence outcomes in pre-school through third grade reading proficiency. School leadership is also key.

In a May 2013 report the National Governors Association (NGA) highlighted the importance of school administrators who understand early childhood education, can effectively evaluate teachers and understand the social-emotional needs of children at this age.

According to the NGA report, many states have launched programs to better train administrators and teachers in pre-school through third grade. Maryland recently created "Early Learning Leadership Academies" to support the professional development of teachers and administrators who work in Title 1 schools. Since 2009, the State Department of Education in New Jersey has partnered with state early child education advocates to coordinate leadership training for teachers and administrators. So far hundreds of professional educators have gone through the program.

It might not be a coincidence that in 2011 New Jersey and Maryland had the second and third highest NAEP third grade reading scores in the country, behind only Massachusetts.

Idaho, too, could follow the lead of these states in training and licensing teachers and administrators. And to make sure we are making progress we could make third grade reading proficiency part of the evaluation process for teachers, principals and superintendents.

## **ASSESSMENT, DIAGNOSIS, INTERVENTION AND MASTERY**

In Florida, former Governor Jeb Bush increased reading proficiency by having the Legislature adopt a strong assessment, intervention and mastery program.

In 2002, 60 percent of Florida's students were reading at or above Basic, according to NAEP. By 2007, that number had grown to 70 percent and two years later to 73 percent, even though by 2011 it had edged back down to 71 percent.

Under the Florida law, every student's reading ability is assessed within 30 days of entering kindergarten. Parents are notified and individual reading plans are created for those students who are not reading at grade level. They receive a follow-up assessment every six weeks to measure how they are progressing.

Every student, regardless of how well they read, is assessed three times a year from kindergarten through third grade. This prevents any student from falling between the cracks.

If a student is not reading at grade level by the end of third grade, they are retained with substantial intervention unless there are mitigating factors that support their advancement. Some states leave it up to principals or school superintendents to sign off before students who are not reading at grade level are moved on to the fourth grade.

The stated goal of the Florida law is **NOT** to retain students, but to hold adults accountable for making sure all students know how to read by the fourth grade.

The Governor's Task Force recommended that Idaho move to a mastery based system where a student advancement is based on their mastering material and not on age or seat time. IBE endorses this recommendation and believes that it can be especially effective in making sure every Idaho 4<sup>th</sup> grader knows how to read at grade level.

## **WHY DOES THIS MATTER TO IDAHO BUSINESSES?**

As business leaders, we have a lot at stake. National studies and IBE's own workforce needs study shows that 61 percent of the jobs over the next five years will require post-secondary education. If a student cannot read proficiently by third grade, it is highly unlikely that he or she will go on to receive a professional certificate, associate or bachelor's degree.

That means a large percentage of Idaho's young people will not have the education or skills to fill the available jobs, requiring employers to conduct expensive searches to import talent or re-locate outside of Idaho to tap the labor pool they need for their businesses to thrive and grow. It will also be hard for Idaho to attract companies with high-paying jobs if prospective businesses can't find the workers they need in our state.

As businesses we also have a stake because, unless something is changed, a large percentage of Idaho's working population will be employed in low-paying jobs. (Idaho already ranks 49<sup>th</sup> in the country in per capita income and number one in the percentage of minimum wage jobs.) The Employment Policies Institute reports that a student who is "below basic" in reading is 4.7 times more likely to earn less than \$300 per week than those who score proficient. That means many Idahoans will have less money to buy your goods and services.

Conversely, McKinsey & Company estimates that the gross domestic product of the United States could have been \$1.3 to \$2.3 trillion dollars higher in 2008 if our country had achieved the same educational levels as higher-performing nations between 1983 and 1998.

**In other words, education costs, but the cost of not educating is even higher.**

### **SO WHAT IS IBE DOING ABOUT THIS?**

IBE is working with policymakers, educators and child advocacy groups to find solutions to our reading proficiency problem. We have encouraged the creation of a technical committee that will come back to the 2015 Legislature with ideas about how to improve reading proficiency across the board. IBE hopes to have a seat at the table when this technical committee meets.

### **HOW YOU CAN HELP?**

You are one of the most respected members of your community. Use that credibility to help your employees, customers, neighbors, friends and local elected officials know how imperative it is that we tackle this problem.

### **SUMMARY**

The problem of reading proficiency is a complex and difficult one. We did not get here overnight and we may not solve the problem overnight. But we must begin to address the issue because every year a third of Idaho's children are not **ready to read** by fourth grade.

Until we act, thousands of Idaho young people will continue to struggle throughout their school career, drop-out of school and wind up in low-wage jobs.

Ralph Smith, of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, says there are no "silver bullets" to correct this problem. But he says that parents, educators, policymakers, business leaders, non-profit groups and communities must "put a stake in the ground" and dedicate themselves to helping all children read proficiently. He calls this the "big tent" approach to the problem. He insists that we must "pivot" from studying the issue to actually doing something about it.

**It is not IBE's intention to dictate how we "pivot" to solve this problem. We only care about outcomes. We believe in setting aggressive targets to address this problem and letting the local school districts and professional educators figure out how to meet those targets. In the end, we believe local school leaders should have control over solutions, be held accountable to hit their goals and face consequences if they don't.**

If we are successful, more Idaho students will succeed in school, go on to post-secondary education and get the education and skills they need to succeed in the workplace. Idaho businesses will be the winners because we will have the highly educated and skilled workforce our businesses need to grow and prosper in the years ahead.

# WHERE WE STAND – AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## IDAHO BUSINESS FOR EDUCATION BELIEVES:

1. Every child in Idaho has a **right** to learn how to read and that it is the **responsibility of the adults** in their lives to make sure they do.
2. From kindergarten through third grade students **learn how to read** and from fourth grade on they **read to learn**.
3. The successful implementation of the **Idaho Core Standards** is essential to help all Idaho students read proficiently.
4. Idaho's third grade reading "**Proficiency**" scores, as measured by the National Assessment Educational Progress, should be **increased by 60 percent** and the "**Below Basic**" scores should be **cut by 60 percent** by the **year 2020**. This would bring us closer to the highest-performing state, Massachusetts.
5. State policymakers should make **affordable, appropriate and effective early childhood education** available to every pre-school child in Idaho. Research shows that children learn to read early in life through the help of parents and trained reading specialists.
6. **State funded, full-day kindergarten** should be available to all Idaho children because this is one of the crucial years when students learn to read. Right now Idaho is one of only 10 states that offers half-day, voluntary kindergarten.
7. At least state funded, full-day kindergarten, with a strong reading component, should be available to all students not reading at the appropriate level in kindergarten.
8. The State Department of Education should track **chronic absenteeism** and local education leaders should implement plans that **cut chronic absenteeism 75 percent by 2015 and 90 percent by 2018**. Exceptions should only be made for students who face special circumstances like health issues.
9. Local school districts, with the support of non-government community groups, should implement a strategy for **cutting summer reading loss 50 percent by 2015, 75 percent by 2018 and 90 percent by 2020**. Specific programs should be considered to target low-income children who don't have access to reading resources and for students who are not reading at the appropriate grade level from kindergarten through third grade.
10. State education leaders and the deans of Idaho's teaching colleges should **re-evaluate how teachers learn to teach reading**, especially with the more rigorous Idaho Core Standards. Specific training should be required for all early childhood and kindergarten-third grade instructors. There should be **ongoing training** for veteran teachers.

11. An **understanding of early childhood education and reading** should be required as part of **licensure** for all school administrators who are in charge of pre-school and kindergarten-third grade programs.
12. The State should implement a **robust assessment, diagnosis and intervention policy** to identify **struggling** readers early, determine why they are having difficulty and create an individual reading improvement plan for them.