

How Serious Are We About Early Learning?

By Barbara O'Brien

We have eight years in the life of every child to help him or her get ready for school, thrive in school, and love reading by the end of 3rd grade. The question is: How serious are we about doing this?

Knowing that reading is fundamental to learning, this year 14 states passed legislation on early literacy, bringing to 32, plus the District of Columbia, the total number of states with policies to improve 3rd grade reading proficiency. We know that two-thirds of 4th graders are not considered "proficient" readers, as determined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Worse still, those children who are behind by the end of 3rd grade rarely catch up in 4th grade, yet are expected to read textbooks and face increasingly complex material. And a 1998 study found that 74 percent of students who didn't read at grade level by the end of 3rd grade were still struggling academically in 9th grade. These children were four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

State leaders are searching for ways to respond to the urgent need to increase the number of 3rd graders who read at grade level. A quick fix—retention of failing students—has been hotly debated. But we're having this debate about how to intervene far too late in the life of a child. By the end of 3rd grade, a student is halfway between birth and young adulthood. Long before we make the difficult decision of whether to retain a student, we need to ensure that our schools and our communities do everything in their power to give that child a good start in life.

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Everyone who has the ability to direct resources, whether they are philanthropic grants, public funds, or volunteer-based, should ensure that every young child who is likely to struggle in school has these opportunities to become ready for school: evidence-based home-visiting and parenting programs, access to primary health care and developmental services, timely and appropriate referrals to early intervention and special education, access to high-quality

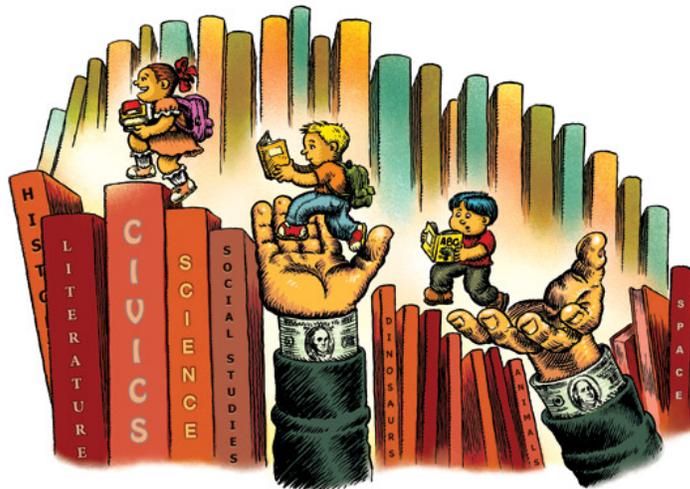
prekindergarten programs, access to excellent child care and Head Start, and access to high-quality, full-day kindergarten programs.

Yes, these interventions cost money, but the amount pales in comparison to the societal burdens—financial and otherwise—associated with high school dropouts and prison inmates, two groups with traditionally high illiteracy rates.

The next step is to ensure that K-3 classrooms are high-quality teaching and learning environments. A report from the organization Rhode Island Kids Count points to several factors that make this transformation possible:

- Effective teacher-preparation programs with an emphasis on the teaching of reading;
- Effective professional development;
- High expectations for special populations;
- Early-warning systems to identify children who are falling behind;
- Dedicated time for program, classroom, school- and district-level planning; and,
- Policies to address chronic absences and summer learning loss.

But what do we do for students who don't reach that critical reading milestone at the end of 3rd grade?



A policy brief by Martin West titled "Is Retaining Students in the Early Grades Self-Defeating?," which was released in August by the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution, suggests that Florida's use of retention as one major tool for helping students read at grade level by 4th grade has improved student achievement. Florida's other policy tools include state laws requiring early identification of K-3 students who are behind in reading, information to parents about the strategies that will be used to help their children, additional time during the school day for intervention, use of reading coaches to provide on-site professional development for teachers, parent training, the opportunity for every K-3 student who is behind to attend a summer reading program, and extra intervention for retained 3rd graders.

Florida's focus on both high-quality instruction and intensive intervention to improve student reading, combined with extra intervention for retained 3rd graders, is a serious attack on the reading crisis. But given the difficult economic times in most states, it has been tempting for state leaders to reach for a quick and less expensive fix: mandating retention for 3rd graders who aren't reading at grade level, without the necessary investments in instruction and intensive intervention.

And this focus on school-based strategies doesn't reduce the number of children who arrive at school already behind. Shortcuts only shortchange the vulnerable children in our communities. Leaders who are serious about increasing the number of children who read proficiently will start with bold efforts to reduce the harsh impact of poverty on a child's growth and development. High-quality child care, for example, would make a huge difference in getting vulnerable young children ready to start kindergarten. Yet most child care for poor children is mediocre, or worse. Few cities and states provide child-care subsidies at a level that allows low-income families to pay for high-quality programs.

Similarly, 40 percent of America's 3- to 5-year-olds were not in preschool in 2010, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation. And, many states have waiting lists for publicly funded preschool for low-income children, despite overwhelming data on the return on investment. The latest endorsement came from none other than Ben Bernanke, the

chairman of the Federal Reserve, during the Children's Defense Fund national conference in July. He said: "Very few alternative investments can promise that kind of return [10 percent or higher]. Notably, a portion of these economic returns accrues to the children themselves and their families, but studies show that the rest of society enjoys the majority of the benefits, reflecting the many contributions that skills and productive workers make to the economy."

Will legislators and school boards have the intestinal fortitude to make tough budget, program, and policy decisions to solve the reading crisis?

My home state of Colorado took a step in the right direction this year when the legislature approved the Early Literacy Act. The legislation allows parents, teachers, and other personnel to meet and consider retention as an intervention strategy for struggling readers. More importantly, the Early Literacy Act requires diagnostic assessments to shape individualized instruction; small reading groups; extra time and enrichment in high-quality summer reading programs; and increased focus on the teaching of reading in teacher-training programs. The state's budget redirects money to support this work.

In another encouraging trend, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading—which I advise on policy—is working with 124 communities across the country to find ways to increase the number of low-income children reading on grade level by the end of 3rd grade. The campaign promotes community-based strategies for increasing children's school readiness and parent engagement, reducing chronic absenteeism in K-3, and increasing the availability of enriched summer learning opportunities.

So all of this underscores that we're not in the dark when it comes to advancing early-literacy skills. In other words, we know what to do. How serious are we about doing it?

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