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## Reading and the Third Grade: How to Keep our Kids on the Right Track

The 2009 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), considered to be a common yardstick for measuring academic progress across the country, exposes some troubling facts about the academic progress of America's low-income students. Among fourth graders, the report found 83 percent of low-income children were not considered to be at the "proficient" level in reading. Even more shocking was the fact that 49 percent of these students were below even the "basic" level.

The failure to reach proficient reading levels by the end of third grade is likely to lead to more serious problems in our children's educational development. Recent studies, including a report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, show that reading proficiency by the end of third grade is a critical benchmark in a child's academic development. The report showed that children who cannot read proficiently by the time they reach fourth grade will have trouble with more challenging academic content in later grades. Moreover, lack of reading proficiency is linked to higher dropout rates. For this reason, the pivotal years between pre-K to third grade are crucial to the academic success of our children.

It's past time we reverse the low proficiency levels in our nation's third graders. Simply being aware of this issue is not enough. So how do we do it?

The same Casey Foundation report, which showed that the third grade is an important benchmark made four recommendations for dealing with low reading levels. First, develop a system of early care that prepares students to read proficiently by third grade and readies students for the remaining years of their primary education and beyond. Second, engage parents, families, and caregivers to play greater roles in overseeing their child's educational development. Third, support "results-driven initiatives" to turnaround low performing schools into quality schools. And lastly we need to overcome two important drivers of the underachievement problem for low-income students: repeated absences from school and summer learning loss.

Head Start is one federally-funded preschool program designed to get low-income children on the right track. Studies about the long-term impact of Head Start have shown mixed results, however. Compared to low-income students who do not participate in Head Start, participants do make short term gains critical to entering school on track. Yet the Head Start Impact Study, released earlier this year by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, showed that entering school on track may not be enough to ensure that children stay on track. It found that benefits to children entering Head Start at age four "are largely absent by first grade." For children starting at age three, it found "there are few sustained benefits."

A key cause of this problem is the lack of coordination between early education programs and the public school system. No matter how successful each is on their own, they need to work together to make sure children move seamlessly from one system to the other. We must work to combat the phenomenon known as "Head Start Fade," where students lose the gains they made in Head Start. By implementing the Casey Foundation recommendations, we can improve the transition from Head Start and other pre-school programs to K-3 education and sustain the gains made during these critical preschool years.

United Way of New York City's Supporting Transitions from Early-education to Public School (STEPS) initiative is a direct response to counter the problem of low-income students falling behind upon entering elementary school.

Generously supported by JPMorgan Chase Foundation and developed in partnership with the NYC Department of Education, Administration for Children's Services, Bank Street College, City University of New York, Lehman College and East Side House, STEPS helps educators, administrators and families better support children's social, emotional and intellectual growth, in a seamless fashion, from birth through third grade.

STEPS is working to better align professional development across early education programs like Head Start and the public school system so that teachers at all levels are using consistent, developmentally appropriate practices that foster lifelong learning. The initiative also engages families in meeting their children's learning and developmental needs continuously for the first eight years of their lives.

STEPS is initially serving 1,000 children as a demonstration project in the South Bronx, where we expect to see increases in the number of third graders who meet reading and math proficiency standards. Ultimately, lessons learned will be used to create system-wide reforms so that all children in New York City may benefit.

Other programs also recognize the importance of helping children develop reading skills by third grade. Reading is Fundamental (RIF) is the nation's oldest and largest children's and family nonprofit literacy organization. RIF programs foster child literacy by targeting underserved children from birth to age 8. They provide literary resources and motivate children to read by delivering free books, chosen by the children themselves.

Programs like RIF and STEPS will be central to decreasing the number of low-income students that are falling behind by third grade and at risk for early dropout. Students need programs that bridge the gap between pre-school and elementary school and provide them with the support they need for greater academic success. This involves giving them a solid academic base by preparing students to read proficiently by the end of the third grade. Parents, educators and communities need to work together to give our children the tools they need to succeed.

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