



# THE ARKANSAS CAMPAIGN FOR GRADE-LEVEL READING

A CALL TO ACTION

ARKANSAS  
CAMPAIGN FOR  
GRADE-LEVEL  
READING

3RD GRADE READING  
SUCCESS MATTERS

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## THE ARKANSAS CAMPAIGN FOR GRADE-LEVEL READING

A student's ability to read at grade level by the end of third grade is the one of the most important predictors of school success and high school graduation. In this report, we answer four questions:

1. Why is reading by third grade important?
2. How does Arkansas measure up on third grade reading proficiency?
3. Why does Arkansas under-perform?
4. What can we do about it?

The Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading will propel the state forward to achieve the following goal:

**BY 2020, ALL ARKANSAS CHILDREN WILL READ AT GRADE LEVEL BY THE END OF THIRD GRADE.**



## THE IMPORTANCE OF GRADE-LEVEL READING IN ARKANSAS

Reading proficiently by the end of third grade impacts a variety of outcomes such as:

- Children's ability to learn after third grade
- Children's academic outcomes as measured by standardized tests, grades, and course failures
- Non-academic outcomes such as self-esteem and behavioral issues
- The strength of our state's economy

**READING TO LEARN.** True reading comprehension is not just the ability to recognize words and articulate them but also the ability to understand the underlying concepts expressed by those words. Reading serves as a crucial skill to a student's growth across all subject areas. As children move beyond the third grade, the reading skills needed to do their work become more sophisticated. The transition from third to fourth grade marks a shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn."<sup>1</sup> From reading and writing in the social sciences to the application of mathematical principles to real world situations, students make use of reading skills on a daily basis across their coursework.

**ACADEMIC OUTCOMES.** A 2010 study on the long-term impact of third grade reading found that students with higher reading scores at the end of third grade also had higher scores when they reached the eighth grade. The study, which looked at the performance of 26,000 Chicago public school students, also found that third grade reading skills are a strong predictor of a ninth grade student's GPA (positively) and number of course failures (negatively).<sup>2</sup>

A 2011 study of nearly 4,000 students born between 1979 and 1989 documented the impact of reading proficiency on staying in school. Almost all (96 percent) readers who were proficient in the third grade graduated high school. However, four times as many non-proficient students failed to graduate by the age of 19. Most troubling, nearly one in four (23 percent) below-basic readers failed to obtain a high school diploma by 19 (although the researchers were unable to authoritatively determine whether the students had actually dropped out).<sup>3</sup>

**NON-ACADEMIC OUTCOMES.** Failure to achieve reading proficiency has also been linked to other factors that may harm a student's chances at academic success. Unskilled readers have low self-esteem, which reduces their confidence in their ability to thrive academically. They are also significantly more likely to engage in behaviors that lead to disciplinary troubles and, indeed, may result in suspensions that prevent their learning. Because of these things, poor reading indirectly shapes educational achievement.<sup>4</sup>

**IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY.** The economic consequences of not graduating from high school are grave. High school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, spend more time in poverty, use more public assistance, and be on death row than people who have a high school diploma.<sup>5</sup>

The transition from third to fourth grade marks a shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn."



What would cutting the dropout rate mean for Arkansas? A 2011 report found that addressing the high school dropout rate would have a huge impact on economic growth in the state. According to the report, an estimated 11,900 Arkansas students dropped out of the class of 2010. If that number were cut in half, to 5,950, the state would see the following:

- \$60 million in increased home sales
- \$51 million in increased gross state product
- \$42 million in increased earnings
- \$33 million in increased spending
- \$9.8 million in increased investments
- \$5.9 million in increased auto sales
- \$3.5 million in increased tax revenue
- 300 new jobs<sup>6</sup>

The societal problems that we usually associate with adults often have their roots in the reading skills developed (or not) by students during their earliest school years. As a recent report on the subject concluded, “The bottom line is that if we don’t get dramatically more children on track as proficient readers, the United States will lose a growing and essential proportion of its human capital to poverty, and the price will be paid not only by individual children and families, but by the entire country.”<sup>7</sup>

## THE ARKANSAS READING GAP

**NAEP.** Analysts of the third grade reading level crisis in the United States typically rely upon scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in evaluating the depth of the problem. NAEP, also known as “The Nation’s Report Card,” employs a careful sampling process to ascertain how America’s students are doing, and its fourth grade exam is given at the start of that school year.<sup>8</sup>

The NAEP scores indicate that a large percentage of Arkansas students are not proficient in reading by the end of third grade. While grade-level reading issues are prevalent across the country, Arkansas lags behind other states in this measure. In 2011, 68 percent of fourth graders nationwide were not proficient. Arkansas ranks 36th in the nation.<sup>9</sup> Despite the educational investments in the state in the last decade, seven in 10 fourth graders continue to lack this important proficiency (see Figure 1).

NAEP also shows that there is a significant gap in reading proficiency among Arkansas students across racial and ethnic lines.<sup>10</sup> Figure 1 shows that 38 percent of Arkansas’s white fourth-graders showed proficiency on the NAEP exam in 2011, while just over one in 10 black students did so. Hispanic students also are challenged in terms of reading proficiency, with under 20 percent of all fourth-graders reading at grade level.

**THE BENCHMARK.** The Arkansas Benchmark Exam is the state-level examinations used to determine whether adequate yearly progress is being achieved under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) education law. The tests are given late in the spring of each year.

As Figure 2 indicates, over the past six years, the Benchmark results have shown a steady increase in the percentage of children who can read proficiently by the end of third grade. This has been true for Black, Hispanic, and White children. And the gap between the different subgroups is narrowing. However, there are still too many children who do not read proficiently—39 percent of Black children, 29 percent of Hispanic children, and 18 percent of White children. There is also a clear gap across school districts. Nearly 42 percent of the state’s school districts have overall reading proficiency rates less than the statewide average.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 1 Percentage of 4th graders reading at or above proficient based on NAEP data, 2002-2011

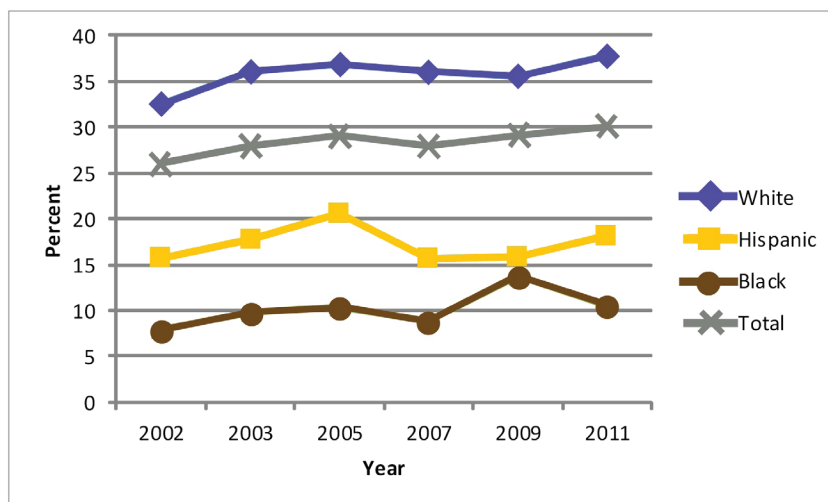


Figure 2 Percentage of 3rd graders reading at or above proficient based on state benchmark data, 2006-2011

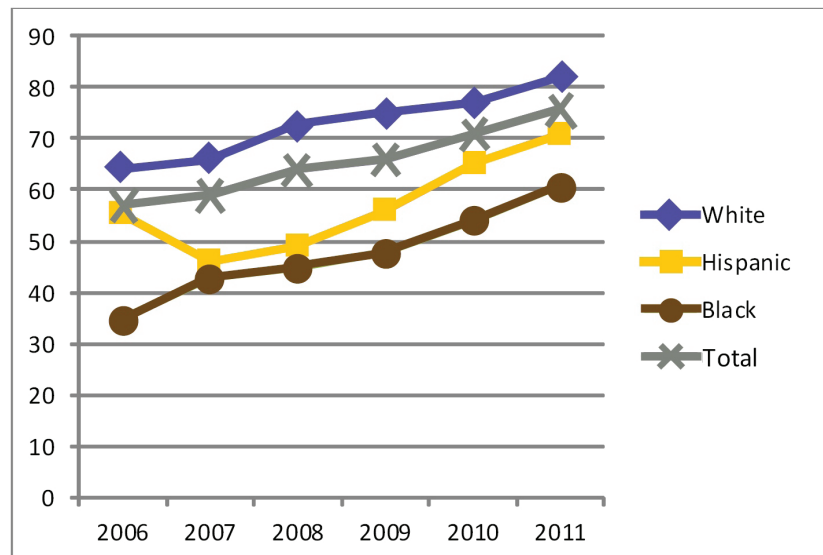
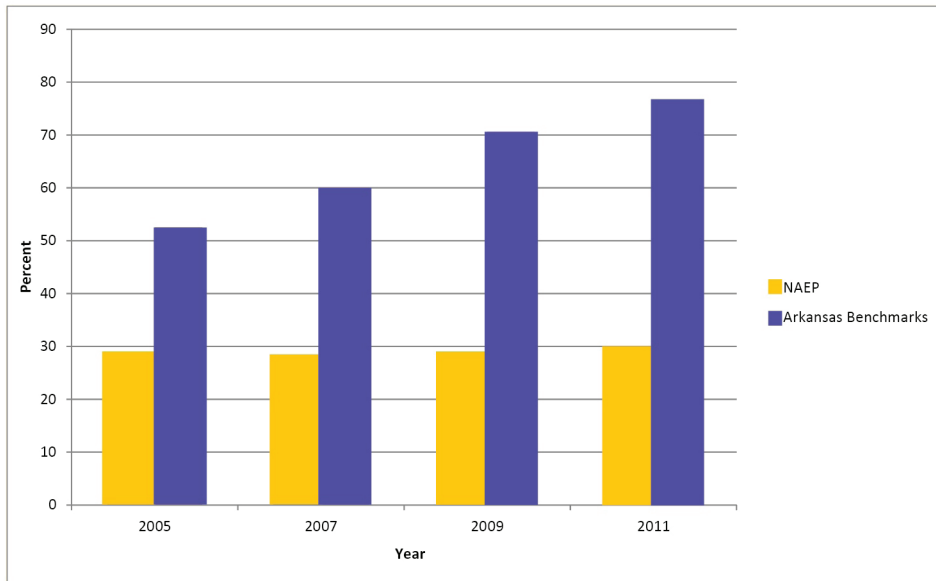


Figure 3

Comparison of state benchmark and NAEP scores for proficient and above, 2005-2011



Analysis of benchmark data also shows that children who are not performing well in the third grade are likely to perform poorly by the eighth grade. The vast majority of third graders (68.5 percent) reading at a level below basic in 2004-05 remained at basic or below basic five years later. Reading skills make a big difference in other subject areas as well. The majority of students who are non-proficient in reading in third grade are non-proficient in math five years later. Students who did better in reading while in third grade, performed better in eighth grade math. In short, early reading proficiency has a big impact on later success in the classroom.

### COMPARING THE NAEP AND THE BENCHMARK.

The state-level examinations used to determine whether adequate yearly progress is being achieved under No Child Left Behind consistently overestimate the percentage of students who are reading proficiently. States have the power to develop their own tests, which are uniformly less stringent than the NAEP test when it comes to meeting internationally recognized educational standards. There is also substantial variability across the states in how they stack up against the NAEP in terms of proficiency. Arkansas's state benchmark exam is one of the more stringent in the country, ranking eighth for fourth grade reading proficiency in terms of its NAEP scale equivalency. Still, it is fair to say that Arkansas's state tests underestimate the number of students reading proficiently at this level, based on international standards. As Figure 3 shows, there is a significant gap between the percentage of children who were reading proficiently as indicated by the 2011 Benchmark (76 percent) and NAEP (30 percent) scores.

The primary challenge in relying on the NAEP as Arkansas's measure of reading proficiency is that results are not available at the local level. Local data is needed to track the progress of individual districts and is needed by state and local officials who formulate policies and allocate resources in response to the progress that districts are making toward reading proficiency goals. The state benchmark test overestimates reading proficiency at the local level, but it is the only way to track local progress.

## IMPACTING THE READING GAP

Research in recent years has begun to clarify what impacts our children's failure to achieve reading proficiency. This research falls into four key impact areas:

- School Readiness
- Chronic Absence
- Summer Learning Loss
- Parent and Community Engagement



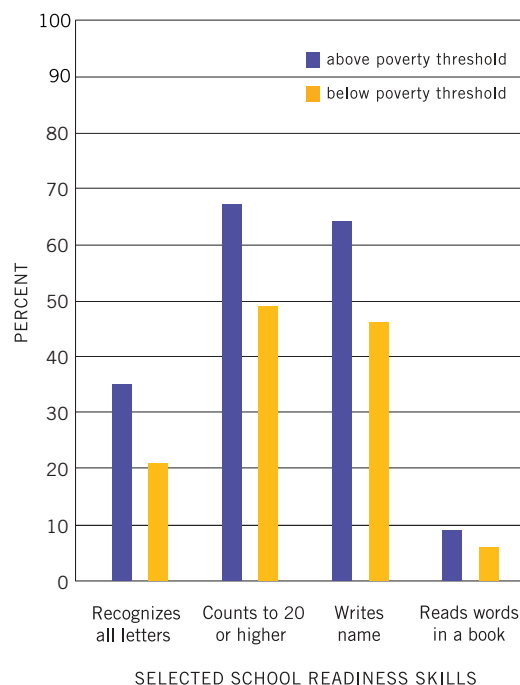
**SCHOOL READINESS.** Too many children from low-income families begin school already far behind. For some children, learning proficiency challenges begin before they are born. As of 2009, nearly one in four mothers in Arkansas still received no prenatal care.<sup>12</sup> A variety of developmental problems, particularly related to brain functioning and behavioral issues (such as ADHD), are tied to being a low-birth weight baby.<sup>13</sup> A growing body of research shows that in utero exposure to drugs, alcohol, and the substances in cigarettes are also tied to detrimental health outcomes that interfere with learning, including reading development.<sup>14</sup>

Low-income children are less likely to be read to regularly or to have access to books, literacy-rich environments, high-quality early care, and pre-kindergarten programs. As a consequence, these children may hear as many as 30 million fewer words than their middle-income peers before reaching kindergarten. Research shows that such interactions are critical for language development, an important precursor to literacy. Only 29 percent of eligible three-year-olds and 59 percent of eligible four-year-olds have access to Arkansas's Pre-K program.

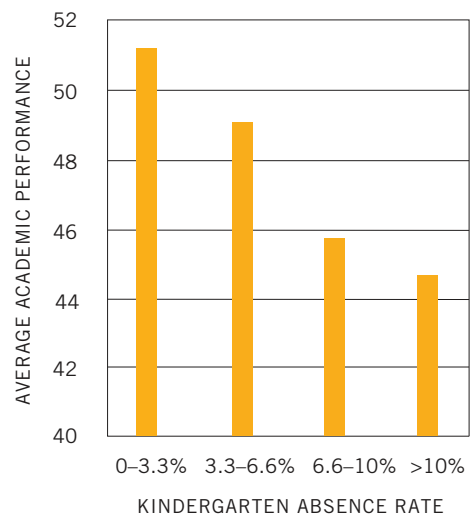
**CHRONIC ABSENCE.** Too many children from low-income families miss too many days of school. In 2004-05, seven percent of Arkansas's third graders were chronically absent, missing one-tenth of the school year, or almost 20 days of school.<sup>15</sup> This percentage likely underestimates the absenteeism rates. On average, Arkansas third graders miss 7.75 days per year, double the national average for that grade.<sup>16</sup> These students can not afford to lose time on task, especially in the early years when reading instruction is a central part of the curriculum. Absenteeism numbers are also important because of their strong correlation with drop-out rates. A separate analysis of Arkansas data has shown that low attendance and being suspended from school are two of the strongest determinants of whether a student drops out of school.<sup>17</sup>

**SUMMER LEARNING LOSS.** Too many children lose ground over the summer months. While lower-income children learn at the same rate as their wealthier peers during the school year, summer learning loss means that, across time, major gaps grow across economic lines. This is true even in the earliest years as students are learning to read; lower-income children lose as much as two months of reading achievement during the summer months. This significantly delays these students' progress in reading proficiency and creates gaps between richer and poorer students that grow exponentially over the course of their

Percentage of Children Ages 3–6 With Selected School Readiness Skills, by Poverty Status

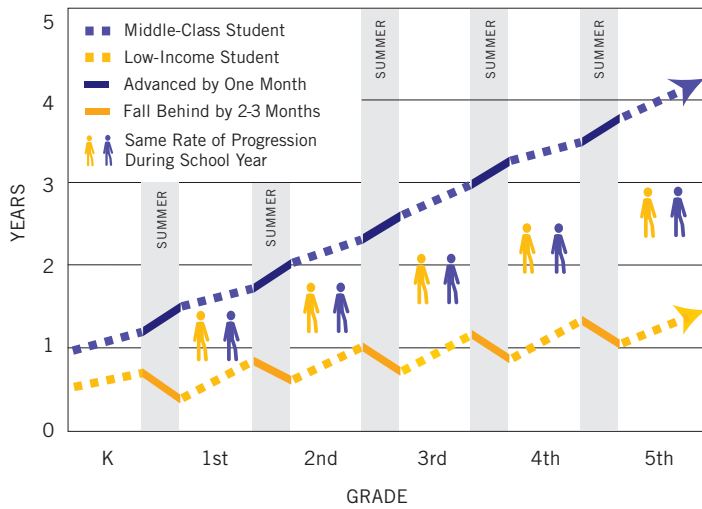


Source: O'Donnell, Kevin. Parents' Reports of the School Readiness of Young Children from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2007, Table 2. National Center for Education Statistics. August 2008. [www.childtrendsdatabank.org/?q=node/291](http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/?q=node/291)



Source: ECLS-K data analyzed by National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP).

### Low-Income Students Fall 2.5 to 3 Years Behind by Fifth Grade



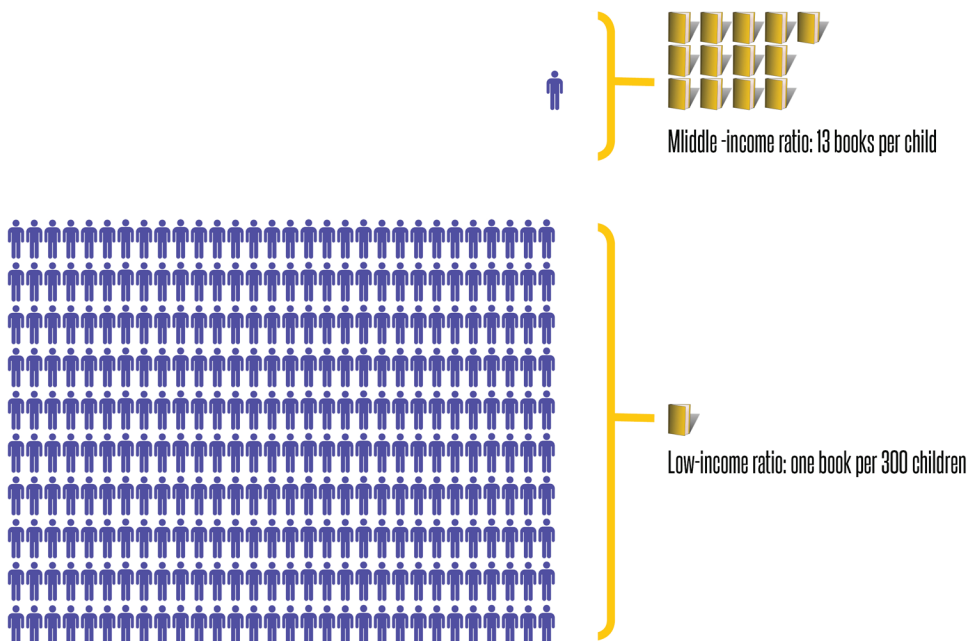
Source: Cooper, H., Borman, G., & Fairchild, R. (2010). "School Calendars and Academic Achievement." In J. Meece & J. Eccles (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Schools, Schooling, and Human Development* (pp. 342-355). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

educational careers. Children from wealthier families actually make gains during the summer months, applying the skills they have learned during the school year to the varied experiences provided to them during the summer.<sup>18</sup> Just 17 percent of Arkansas school children participate in summer learning programs.<sup>19</sup>

**PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.** Children and schools succeed when parents and the community are engaged in the school and with the children. This includes more formal activities such as Parent Teacher Associations and school boards, as well as informal activities such as volunteering during the school day and at school activities. One critical aspect of parent and community engagement is reading to children. A variety of forces can limit parents' ability to play this important teaching role. First, many working parents lack the time needed to read to children in a relaxed setting. Second, many parents don't have the literacy skills or access to books and other materials

to aid in reading to their children. Finally, many parents do not know what an important force they can be in shaping their children's preparation for school. All of these limitations, of course, are most likely to be faced by lower-income parents.<sup>20</sup> Because buying books can be difficult for lower income families, strong public libraries are crucial. Per capita funding for public libraries in Arkansas is one half of the national average.

### Ratio of age-appropriate books per child in middle- and low-income neighborhoods



Source: Neuman, Susan B. and David K. Dickinson, ed. *Handbook of Early Literacy Research, Volume 2*. New York, NY: 2006, p. 31. [www.serve.gov/toolkits/book-drive/index.asp](http://www.serve.gov/toolkits/book-drive/index.asp)



## CLOSING THE READING GAP

The goal of the Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is to make sure that by 2020 all Arkansas children read at grade level by the end of third grade. Seem ambitious? It is. But it is a goal we can reach. The research is clear on the importance of grade-level reading. If we can reach our goal, the educational and economic benefits to Arkansas will be enormous: improved literacy, higher graduation rates, untold economic benefits, and an educated workforce ready to tackle the global economy of the 21st century.

**HOW DO WE GET THERE?** By focusing on each of the four impact areas and fostering a culture that values and invests in the education of our children.

**IMPROVE SCHOOL READINESS** by investing in prenatal care and expanding early childhood education. Arkansas has made significant strides in recent decades to improve prenatal care, but clear challenges remain. A particular challenge is the unavailability of services in the most remote parts of the state. In rural Arkansas, innovations such as telemedicine are addressing but have not solved the challenges of accessibility.

High-quality early childhood education has proven to be the most promising strategy to help less advantaged children start school with the same potential for learning as their more advantaged peers. While not a cure-all for every educational challenge that a child encounters, early childhood education helps level the playing field, including reading preparation, before those limitations become an expansive barrier to children's learning success.<sup>21</sup>

Over the last decade, Arkansas has made a major investment in early childhood education for three- and four-year-olds, dramatically expanding access for at-risk students and upgrading the quality of its program to become one of the nation's best. This investment has begun to produce results for children from different economic, racial, and ethnic groups as they start school, getting more students on the path to effective reading.



There remains important work to be done if the state is to use the power of early childhood education to create proficient readers. First, many young people who are eligible for the program do not enjoy its benefits because of state budget limitations, the lack of local providers, or because some families choose not to take advantage of the program. Second, while many families up to 200 percent of poverty are eligible for free access to the program subject to state budget constraints, this leaves many working-poor families without the ability to cover the cost if they can get their child into a program. Finally, it is crucial that Arkansas policy makers continue to address issues related to enhancing teacher qualifications and ratchet up standards with a particular focus on reading preparation.

**REDUCE CHRONIC ABSENCE** by improving school-based health systems and keeping better track of students who routinely miss classes. A variety of factors drive chronic absence: parents not prioritizing attendance, aspects of the school environment that push children away, and logistical challenges in getting children to and from school.<sup>22</sup> The most common logistical challenges are family instability, a variety of factors tied to socio-economic situation, ranging from homelessness to less obvious realities of being poor in America, and illness, especially asthma.<sup>23</sup>

Proactive steps to improve student health in Arkansas would have an immediate impact on chronic absence. The Coordinated School Health model, which operates in districts around the state, and helps schools leverage community health resources to meet the health needs of their students, is nationally recognized. Arkansas has 11 School Based Health Centers, which provide accessible care for both well-child checkups and acute and chronic health care needs. Both of these efforts could be expanded.

Arkansas should use its longitudinal tracking system to reach out to parents and highlight the dangers of chronic absence as soon as the pattern begins to show itself. That same tracking system can identify patterns

across schools where chronic absence is common and identify problems within the school environment, like bullying, that are pushing children away. School social workers, home visitors, and other staff can reach out to parents to help solve their social and economic challenges.

**STOP SUMMER LEARNING LOSS** by investing in high-quality summer programs that give kids an opportunity to learn during the summer months. For low-achieving students, summer reading programs provide the opportunity to catch up to peers. A few weeks of intensive instruction with individual attention increases proficiency and leads to increases in positive attitudes about school and self-esteem, especially when parents are involved in the programs.

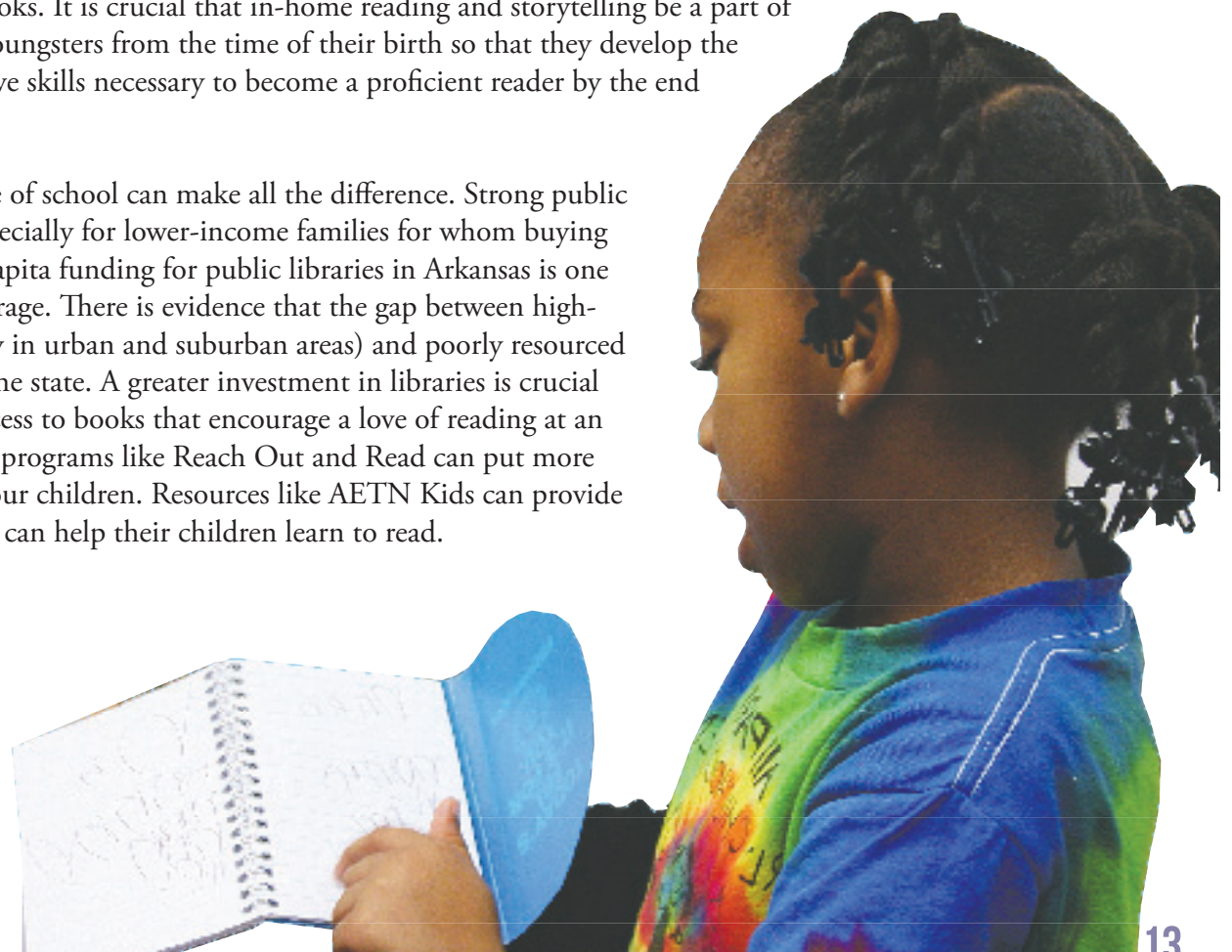
While a variety of summer programs of varied quality exist in the state of Arkansas, there is no statewide initiative for summer learning in Arkansas. Following on recommendations developed by the 2008 Governor's Task Force on Best Practices for After-school and Summer Programs, the De-

partment of Human Services, the Department of Education, the Arkansas Out of School Network (AOSN), and local service providers have worked together to establish quality standards, licensing requirements, professional development trainings, and evaluation methods needed to operate quality programs in the state of Arkansas.

In the 2011 session of the General Assembly, legislators passed the Positive Youth Development Grant Program Act. The bill aims to expand the availability of positive youth development programs to children ages five through 19 and establishes a grant program to support positive youth development efforts – including high-quality summer programming – in the state. At present, the rules and regulations for the grant program are being developed. Unfortunately, there is no funding stream for the program. It is the next priority for advocates of expanded out-of-school opportunities for young kids. Summer programs aimed at undermining summer learning loss would be a great investment for the state of Arkansas as it works to ensure higher rates of grade level reading in its students.

**STRENGTHEN PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT** by encouraging involvement and making sure kids have access to books outside of school hours. Strong schools have strong parent and community engagement. In these schools, parents and other community members are involved in governance and provide ongoing volunteer support to children and teachers. Children benefit when more adults are involved in their lives, both at school and at home, and when they have access to more resources, including books. It is crucial that in-home reading and storytelling be a part of the life experience of youngsters from the time of their birth so that they develop the vocabulary and cognitive skills necessary to become a proficient reader by the end of third grade

Access to books outside of school can make all the difference. Strong public libraries are crucial, especially for lower-income families for whom buying books is difficult. Per capita funding for public libraries in Arkansas is one half of the national average. There is evidence that the gap between high-quality libraries (mostly in urban and suburban areas) and poorly resourced libraries has grown in the state. A greater investment in libraries is crucial for children to have access to books that encourage a love of reading at an early age. Additionally, programs like Reach Out and Read can put more books in the hands of our children. Resources like AETN Kids can provide tools to parents so they can help their children learn to read.





## CALL TO ACTION

There is no single answer to solving the grade-level reading crisis in Arkansas. A variety of responses, involving the work of parents, educators, policymakers, and others in the community are crucial to eliminate the percentage of students who are non-proficient in reading at the end of third grade. We must:

- Improve school readiness
- Reduce chronic absence
- Stop summer learning loss
- Strengthen parent and community engagement

The **ARKANSAS CAMPAIGN FOR GRADE-LEVEL READING** will need the support and involvement of you - our citizens, our community leaders, our state and local partners, and our policymakers - to accomplish our goal of making sure all children read at grade level by the end of third grade. Do your part. Join the campaign at [WWW.AR-GLR.NET](http://WWW.AR-GLR.NET).

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Joy Lesnick, Robert E. Goerge, Cheryl Smithgill, and Julia Gwynn. 2010. *Reading on Grade Level in Third Grade: How Is It Related to High School Performance and College Enrollment?*, Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
- <sup>2</sup> Lesnik et al.
- <sup>3</sup> Donald J. Hernandez. 2011. *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011.
- <sup>4</sup> Nonie K. Lesaux. 2010. *Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success*, Strategies for Children, Inc.
- <sup>5</sup> John M. Bridgeland, John J. Dilulio, and Karen Burke Morison. 2006. *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprise
- <sup>6</sup> "Education and the Economy: Boosting Arkansas' Economy by Improving High School Graduation Rates." Alliance for Excellent Education, March 2011.
- <sup>7</sup> Leila Feister, EARLY WARNING!: *Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*. 2010. Annie E. Casey Foundation: 7.
- <sup>8</sup> From the NAEP reading standards: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/achieveall.asp>.
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www.kansasopengov.org/SchoolDistricts/StudentAchievement/NAEPRankingsbyState/4thGradeReadingProficiency/tabid/2169/Default.aspx>
- <sup>10</sup> For more on achievement gap, see Jay Barth and Keith Nitta, *Education in the Post-Lake View Era: What is Arkansas Doing to Close the Achievement Gap?*, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families and Arkansas Public Policy Panel, 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> While 2012 Benchmark data have been released, as of August 24, 2012, the racial breakdowns are not yet available, so we present only the 2011 data in our report.
- <sup>12</sup> Arkansas Department of Health, *The Current Birth Data by State, Region, and County: May 2010*; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Volume 58, number 24.
- <sup>13</sup> Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill, 2009. *Creating an Opportunity Society*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press; Maureen Hack, Daniel J. Flannery, Mark Schluchter, Lydia Cartar, Elaine Borawski, and Nancy Klein. 2002. "Outcomes for Young Adulthood for Very-Low-Birth-Weight Infants." *New England Journal of Medicine* 347: 141-143.
- <sup>14</sup> Diane Barone. "Prenatal Drug and Alcohol Exposure and Reading Disabilities. 2011. In R. Allington and A. McGill-Franzen, (Eds.), *Handbook of Reading Disabilities*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Publishers: 120-128.
- <sup>15</sup> Author's analysis of de-identified Arkansas longitudinal testing data received from the Arkansas Research Center.
- <sup>16</sup> Marijosé Romero and Young-Sun Lee. 2007. *A National Portrait of Chronic absence in the Early Grades*. New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University.
- <sup>17</sup> Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes, *Early Indicator Analysis: Arkansas*, Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, 2010.
- <sup>18</sup> Harris Cooper, Barbara Nye, Kelly Charlton, James Lindsay, and Scott Greathouse. 1996. "The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores: A Narrative and Meta-Analytic Review." *Review of Educational Research* 66: 227-268.
- <sup>19</sup> [http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3pm\\_Summer\\_2010/ArkansasNR.pdf](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3pm_Summer_2010/ArkansasNR.pdf)
- <sup>20</sup> Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Lisa B. Markman, 2005. "The Contributions of Parenting to Ethnic and Racial Gaps in School Readiness." *The Future of Children* 15: 139-168.
- <sup>21</sup> Robert G. Lynch. 2007. *Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation: Public Investment in High-Quality Prekindergarten*, Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- <sup>22</sup> Julia Steiny 2012. "Chronic absence Reveals and Causes Problems." *Education News*, 1 February (<http://www.educationnews.org/education-policy-and-politics/julia-steiny-chronic-absenteeism-reveals-and-causes-problems/>).
- <sup>23</sup> Chang and Romero, 2008.

The findings of this report are based on a forthcoming report on grade-level reading by Hendrix professor jay barth.



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