



data  
snapshot  
KIDS COUNT



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# EARLY READING PROFICIENCY in the United States

Today's children are our nation's hope for building a strong future economy and thriving society. One of the key milestones on the path to success is learning to read in the early grades. As documented in the Casey Foundation's reports *Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters* and *Early Warning Confirmed*, the end of third grade marks the point when children transition from learning to read to using reading to learn other subjects. Children who read proficiently by the end of third grade are more likely to graduate from high school and to be economically successful in adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

This report provides an update on how fourth graders are faring in reading across the nation and in each state. According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data, 80 percent of low-income fourth graders and 66 percent of all fourth graders are not proficient in reading.<sup>2</sup> Although improvements have been made in the past decade, reading proficiency remains unacceptably low in an economic environment that requires increasing levels of education and skills for family-sustaining jobs. By 2020, the United States is expected to face a shortage of 1.5 million workers with college degrees but will have a surplus of 6 million individuals without a high school diploma who are unemployed because they lack necessary educational

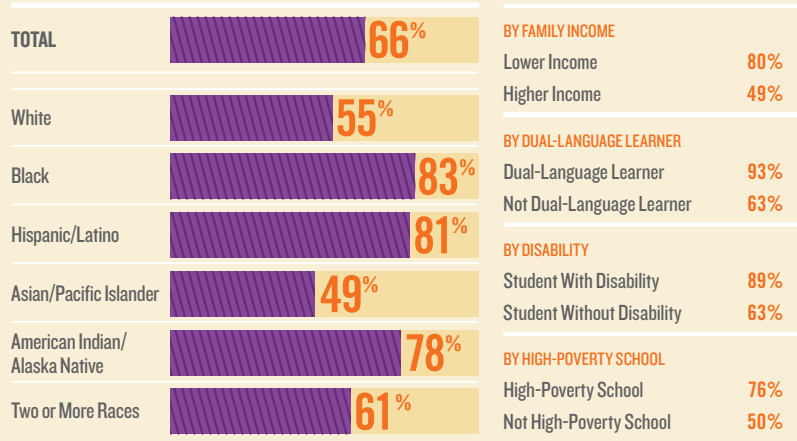
credentials.<sup>3</sup> If we do not make sure all children gain the needed reading skills to be successful in school, their future educational and economic prospects will be dim, and our economy will lag.

There are many paths to success in life, but they all begin with a strong foundation in health, social-emotional skills and cognitive development. Brain research tells us that the first eight years are critical

FIGURE 1

## Percentage of Fourth-Grade Students Reading Below Proficient Levels, 2013

Although reading proficiency rates have improved for most demographic groups over the last decade, large disparities still exist by race, income and disability status and for dual-language learners.



SOURCE U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2013 Reading Assessment.

for building the foundation for future learning and emotional development. Unfortunately, by the time they are 8 years old, many children—especially those living in low-income families—have not met the developmental milestones that are essential for future success in school and in life.<sup>4</sup> This gap often starts early as a result of health problems at birth, contributing to lags in language and social-emotional skill development in early childhood. Low-income children are also more likely to miss out on high-quality early learning experiences, which can help mitigate these delays.<sup>5</sup> Once they reach the early grades, children in economically fragile families often attend schools that lack high-quality teaching and learning environments. They also face family-related

stressors, such as parental job loss and housing insecurity, which contribute to chronic absence from school.<sup>6</sup>

**Despite improvements, disparities remain across income and racial groups**

Over the past decade, there has been some improvement in reading proficiency for most groups of children, including all of the five largest racial groups. However, these gains have not significantly reduced disparities associated with income level and race, as well as dual-language learning and disability status.

Scores for higher- and lower-income groups improved in the past decade, but proficiency levels increased significantly more for higher-income students (17 percent improvement) than for their lower-income peers (6 percent improvement). As a result, the gap in proficiency rates between low-income and higher-income children widened by nearly 20 percent over the past decade and got worse in nearly every state. The most recent data show that 80 percent of children in low-income families are below proficiency in reading, compared with 49 percent of higher-income children. Children in low-income families fare even worse when they attend economically disadvantaged schools.

Large disparities remain in reading proficiency levels between black (83 percent not proficient), Latino (81 percent) and American Indian (78 percent) children and their white (55 percent) and Asian (49 percent) peers. Rates of students not proficient in reading are also significantly higher for children who are dual-language learners (93 percent) and those with disabilities (89 percent). Dual-language learners are one of the few groups for whom reading proficiency rates did not improve over the past 10 years. This is especially troubling given changing demographics and the increasing importance this group of children will play in the future success of the country.

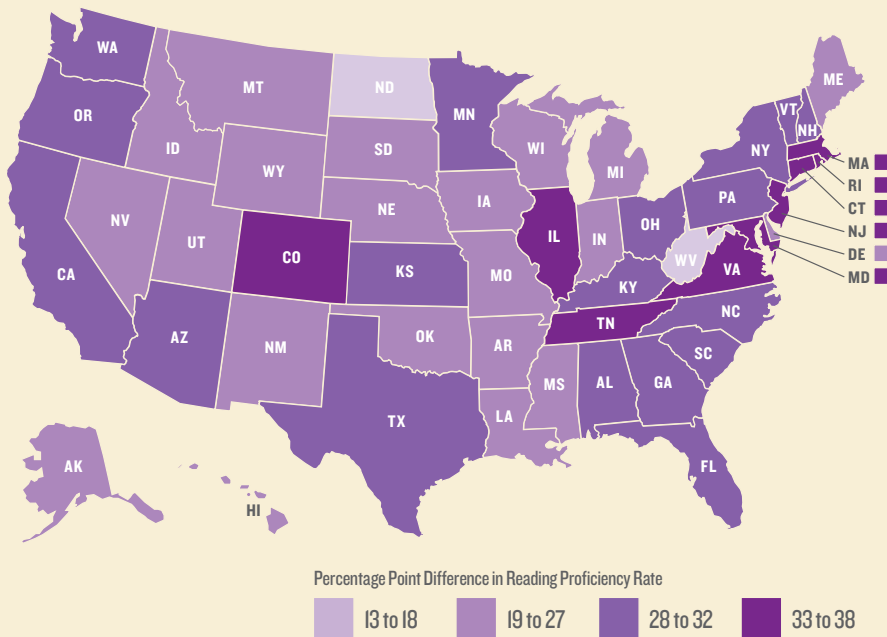
**Rates vary significantly by state**

The likelihood that children will read proficiently by fourth grade varies dramatically by where they grow up. In 2013, 79 percent of fourth-grade students in

FIGURE 2

**Gap in Fourth-Grade Reading Proficiency Scores Between Lower- and Higher-Income Students**

The gap in reading proficiency based on family income is highest in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Illinois where scores for higher-income students are at least 36 percentage points better than their lower-income peers.



SOURCE U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2013 Reading Assessment.

TABLE I

## Percentage of Fourth Graders Reading Below Proficient Levels, by Family Income

In every state, lower-income students are less likely to be reading proficiently than their higher-income peers. Find this indicator and related data for your community at [datacenter.kidscount.org](http://datacenter.kidscount.org).

Jurisdiction	All Students		Percent Improvement	Lower Income	Higher Income
	2003	2013	2003 to 2013	2013	2013
National	70	66	6	80	49
Alabama	78	69	12	82	51
Alaska	72	73	-1	85	60
Arizona	77	72	6	85	57
Arkansas	72	68	6	78	54
California	79	73	8	85	54
Colorado	63	59	6	79	45
Connecticut	57	57	0	81	43
Delaware	67	62	7	75	48
District of Columbia	90	77	14	87	39
Florida	68	61	10	73	42
Georgia	73	66	10	79	47
Hawaii	79	70	11	83	57
Idaho	70	67	4	78	56
Illinois	69	66	4	84	48
Indiana	67	62	7	75	49
Iowa	65	62	5	77	52
Kansas	67	62	7	78	46
Kentucky	69	64	7	77	49
Louisiana	80	77	4	85	58
Maine	64	63	2	76	52
Maryland	68	55	19	76	42
Massachusetts	60	53	12	75	38
Michigan	68	69	-1	81	56
Minnesota	63	59	6	77	48
Mississippi	82	79	4	85	58
Missouri	66	65	2	77	51
Montana	65	65	0	78	54
Nebraska	68	63	7	77	51
Nevada	80	73	9	83	56
New Hampshire	60	55	8	76	47
New Jersey	61	58	5	78	44
New Mexico	81	79	2	85	61
New York	66	63	5	77	47
North Carolina	67	65	3	78	47
North Dakota	68	66	3	78	60
Ohio	66	63	5	80	48
Oklahoma	74	70	5	79	57
Oregon	69	67	3	79	50
Pennsylvania	67	60	10	77	45
Rhode Island	71	62	13	81	45
South Carolina	74	72	3	83	54
South Dakota	67	68	-1	82	58
Tennessee	74	66	11	82	48
Texas	73	72	1	83	53
Utah	68	63	7	76	54
Vermont	63	58	8	74	46
Virginia	65	57	12	79	44
Washington	67	60	10	77	47
West Virginia	71	73	-3	76	63
Wisconsin	67	65	3	80	53
Wyoming	66	63	5	76	54

**NOTE** Family income is measured using students' eligibility for the National School Lunch Program. Free or reduced-price lunches are offered to students with income below 185 percent of the poverty level.

**SOURCE** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2003 and 2013 Reading Assessment.

## Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

Launched in May 2010, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is a collaborative effort of funders, nonprofit partners, states and more than 140 communities across the nation to ensure that many more children from low-income families succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, a career and active citizenship. It focuses on reading proficiency by the end of third grade, a key milestone missed by fully 80 percent of low-income children. The Campaign's goal: By 2020, a dozen states or more will increase by at least 100 percent the number of children from low-income families reading proficiently at the end of third grade. Find more information, including additional resources for improving reading proficiency for young children, at <http://gradelevelreading.net>.

New Mexico and Mississippi were not reading proficiently, compared with 53 percent in Massachusetts. A significant majority of states made gains in reading proficiency in the past decade, with the biggest gains occurring in Maryland, the District of Columbia and Rhode Island. Only four states—West Virginia, Michigan, Alaska and South Dakota—saw their rates get slightly worse.

In every state, children from low-income families are less likely to be reading than their higher-income peers, and in nearly all states, the gap increased over the past decade. The gap in proficiency rates based on family income is highest in the District of Columbia, Massachusetts and Connecticut. Over the past decade, the gap increased by more than 30 percent in 12 states and the District of Columbia, with the largest increases occurring in the District, Hawaii and Tennessee.

### Moving Forward

Reading proficiency rates have improved over the past decade, but large gaps remain across states and key demographic groups. Given the changing demographics of the United States, in order for our nation to remain competitive, we must build on our successes and make certain that all children, including children of color and immigrant children, are reaching this critical milestone. At the same time, increasing reading proficiency for low-income children in the early years can ensure that they are on track to gain the educational credentials they will need to earn a family-supporting wage and move up the income ladder.

Research points to the need to make certain that children are physically healthy so they can be present and learning every

day, socially and emotionally on track and exposed to as much language as possible in the early years to increase their chances of meeting this important milestone. To do this, we must encourage and support parents, families and caregivers to be coproducers of good outcomes for their children. This means ensuring that families are economically stable, emotionally healthy and actively engaged in children's learning every day.

We must hold schools and policymakers accountable to support results-driven solutions to transform low-performing schools into high-quality learning environments. Communities must work with schools to ensure that more children show up at school ready to learn, attend school every day and maintain their learning over the summer months. Finally, we must work together to develop a coherent system of early care and education that aligns, integrates and coordinates what children experience from birth through age 8.

### ENDNOTES

1. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2013). *Early Warning Confirmed: A Research Update on Third-Grade Reading*. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org); The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2010). *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)
2. National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress. <http://nationsreportcard.gov>
3. Manyika, J., et al. (2012, March). *Help wanted: The future of work in advanced economies* (discussion paper). Washington, DC: McKinsey Global Institute.
4. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2013). *The First Eight Years: Giving Kids a Foundation for Lifetime Success*. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)
5. Ibid.
6. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2010). *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)



## THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The KIDS COUNT Data Snapshot series highlights specific indicators of child well-being contained in the KIDS COUNT Data Center ([datacenter.kidscount.org](http://datacenter.kidscount.org)). KIDS COUNT, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children in the United States.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow.

