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## The third-grade reader

By Margaret Blood and Richard Weissbourd | September 16, 2009

STATE EDUCATION officials recently trumpeted gains in 10th-grade MCAS scores, while headlines warned that 6,000 high school seniors have not yet passed the science test now required for graduation. When community-by-community MCAS results are announced today, we should all focus on a number that foreshadows later success - or failure - in school: third-grade reading scores.

Third grade marks the critical transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," as reading begins to underpin instruction in all subjects. Yet 43 percent of Massachusetts third-graders tested last May were not proficient readers. The results for low-income students are more disturbing. Nearly two-thirds were less than proficient.

About three-quarters of these children, research suggests, will continue to struggle throughout their school careers. They are less likely to graduate from high school. They are less likely to develop the skills to contribute to the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century and thus less likely to find jobs with decent wages. They are less able to become informed, effective citizens and face higher rates of incarceration. That is why law enforcement officials and business leaders alike endorse investing in high-quality early education.

Certainly, no child's fate is sealed by the age of 8 or 9. Yet ensuring that all children leave third grade knowing how to read is more desirable than playing catch-up with more than two-fifths of young students. It is less difficult educationally and less expensive, not to mention less stressful for children and families, to prevent the problem than it is to cure it. Boston School Superintendent Carol Johnson aims to have 85 percent of third-graders achieve reading proficiency by 2012, and in Springfield the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation has launched a citywide initiative called "Reading Success by Fourth Grade."

As important as the quality of teaching and leadership in schools is in developing capable readers, there are things that can be done to lay the foundations of literacy well before children enter elementary school. The first is to promote language development at home, beginning in infancy. Children whose family members regularly read to them and engage them in conversation are better prepared for school. The larger a young child's vocabulary and the more words she hears - from talk, not television - the better she'll do in school. As Betty S. Bardige notes in her new book, "Talk to Me, Baby," the amount of playful talk a child experiences before age 3 better predicts later school success than family income or race or social status. Both ReadBoston and the City of Cambridge have embarked on innovative campaigns to encourage this talk. Such efforts must be expanded.

High-quality early education makes a difference, too, particularly for the low-income children most at risk of lagging in reading. Low-income children who attended a high-quality preschool are 40 percent less likely to need special education services or repeat a grade, research suggests, and 30 percent more likely to graduate from high school. Congress should support legislation to create an Early Learning Challenge Fund, expected to come to a vote in the House of Representatives today.

The Commonwealth recognizes the importance of early education in its universal pre-kindergarten grants, but modest funding reaches only 6,600 preschoolers. Head Start and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, an accrediting body, are phasing in new requirements for the training of teachers, but the thorny issue of adequate compensation for early educators still needs to be addressed as that workforce gains the skills necessary to prepare children for success in school.

The time has come for us to pay as much attention to third-grade reading scores as we do to high school scores. The time has come for us to invest the effort and money needed to make sure all Massachusetts children leave third grade as competent readers.

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