

# THIRD GRADE READING

Why reading at grade level matters

“We will never close the achievement gap, we will never solve our dropout crisis, we will never break the cycle of poverty that afflicts so many children if we don't make sure that all our students learn to read.”

—Ralph Smith, Executive Vice President  
Annie E. Casey Foundation

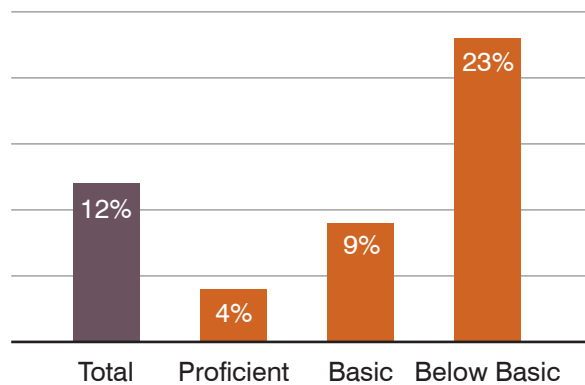


# Third grade reading skills influence high school graduation and college attendance

Learning to read is critically important for a child’s educational development. Children learn to read from kindergarten through third grade, then begin reading to learn. Children who are not reading at grade level by the end of the third grade often fall further behind and may never catch up.

Research shows that “one in six children who are not reading proficiently in third grade do not graduate from high school on time.”<sup>1</sup> Proficient readers are four times more likely to graduate on time than those with below basic scores. Among proficient readers, only four percent fail to graduate. Of children who scored below basic in third grade, 23 percent fail to graduate (Figure 1).

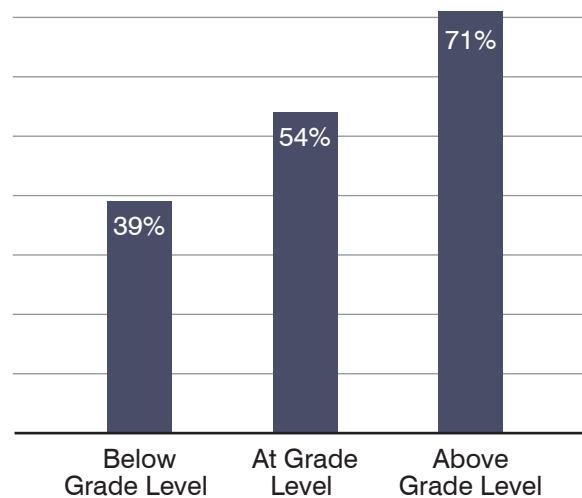
FIGURE 1. Percent of Students Not Graduating From High School by Third Grade Reading Level



Source: Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011.

Third grade reading proficiency provides a foundation for future educational performance and is a strong predictor of high school graduation and college attendance. A recent study shows a correlation between third-grade reading level and college attendance (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup> Students with lower third-grade reading scores are much less likely to attend college.

FIGURE 2. Percent High School Graduates Attending College by Third Grade Reading Level



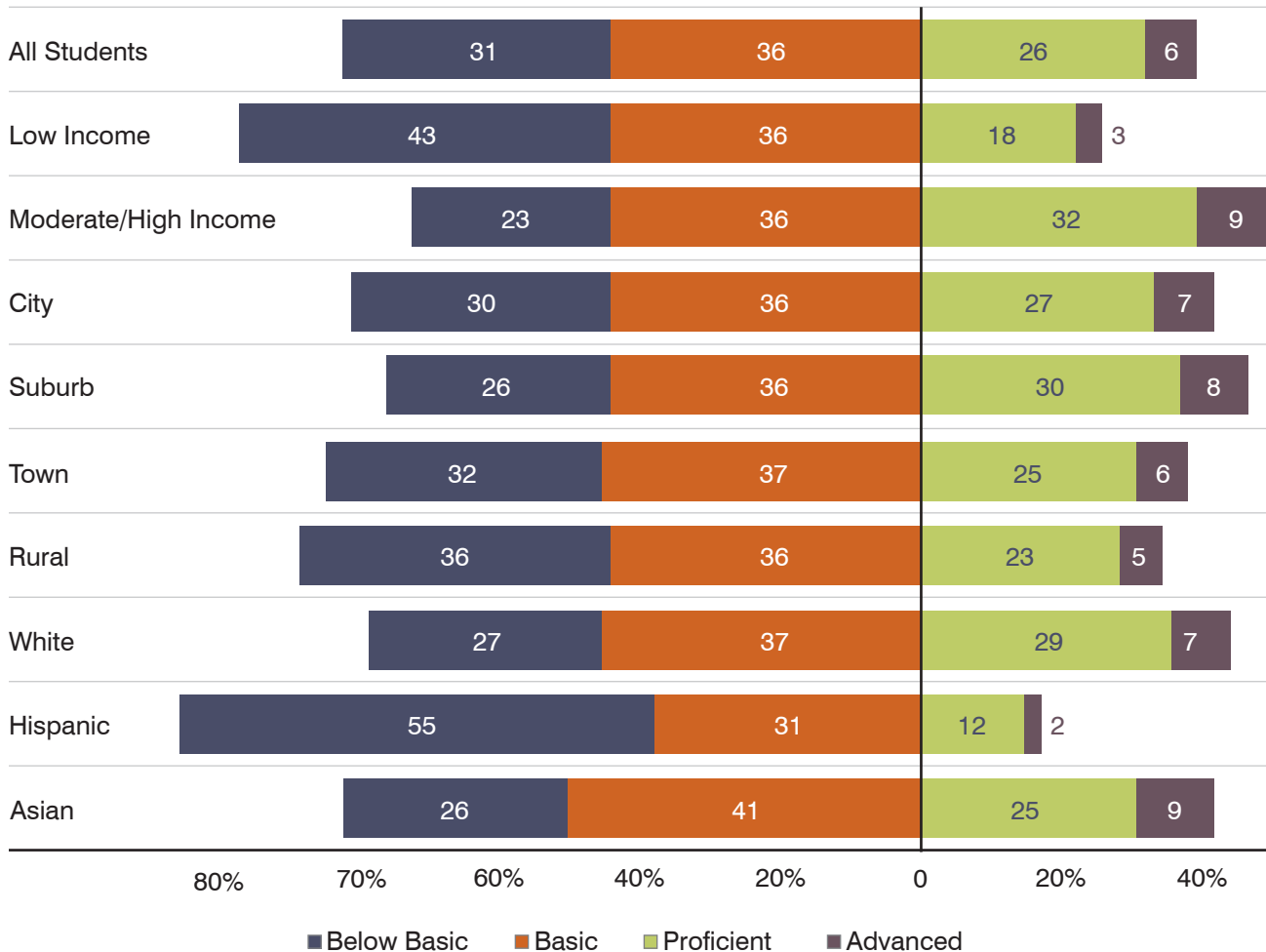
Source: Reading on Grade Level in Third Grade: How Is It Related to High School Performance and College Enrollment? Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2010.

# Idaho's fourth grade reading scores

Too many of Idaho's children are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade. According to the National Education Association, only 32 percent of Idaho's fourth grade students scored at or above proficient in reading in 2009 (Figure 3).<sup>3</sup> This means that more than two-thirds of Idaho's fourth graders are not prepared to succeed in school.

Underperformance in reading ability is especially noticeable among low-income, rural and minority students. Among those who took the exam in Idaho, 79 percent of low-income, 72 percent of rural, and 86 percent of Hispanic fourth grade students failed to reach proficient levels (Figure 3).\*

FIGURE 3. Percent of Idaho Students by Fourth Grade Reading Achievement Level and by Family Income, Geography and Race/Ethnicity, 2009



Source: 2009 Reading Assessment, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), National Center for Education Statistics.

\*The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), often called the "Nation's Report Card," is the only measure of student achievement in the United States that allows student performance to be compared across states and over time. For this reason, this report examines NAEP results. The Idaho Standards Achievement Tests (ISAT) shows scores that are strikingly higher compared to NAEP, however, ISAT and NAEP do not define 'proficiency' in the same way.

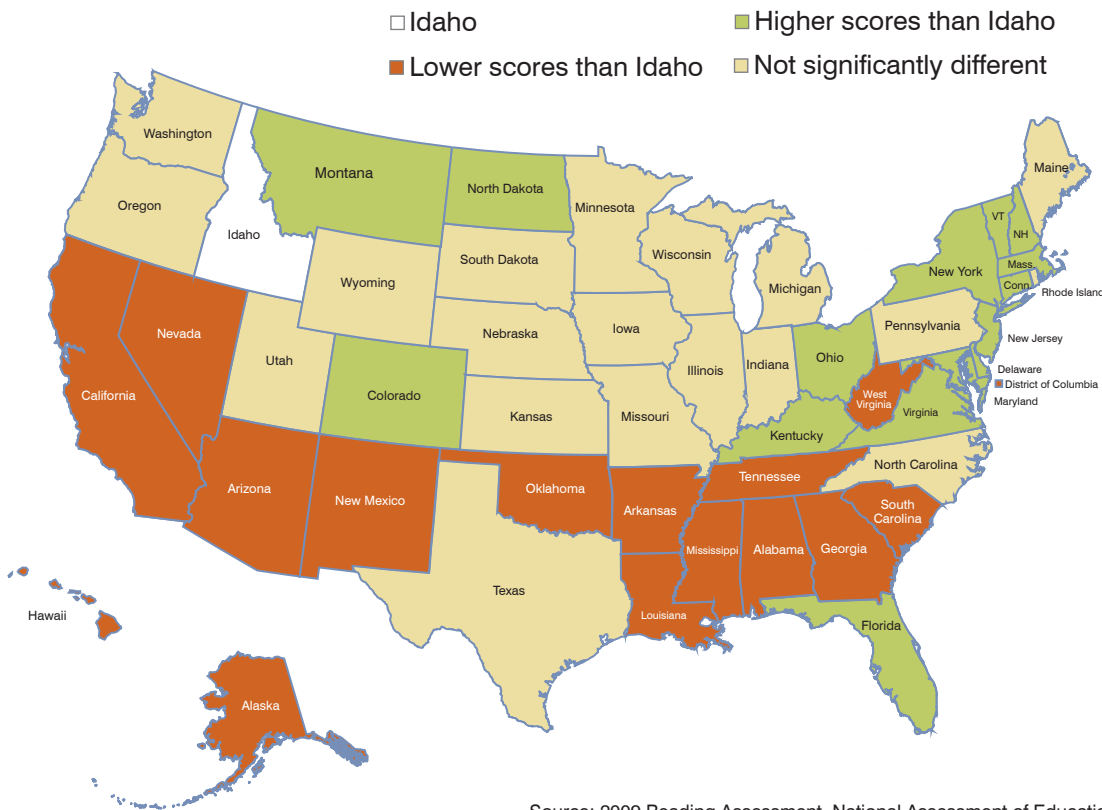
# Comparisons to other states and countries

Across the 50 states and the District of Columbia, reading skills leave much to be desired. The percentage of fourth-graders at or above proficient in reading ranges from 17 percent in the District of Columbia to 47 percent in Massachusetts.<sup>4</sup> With 32% proficient, Idaho ranks 28th out of 51.

The average scores for Idaho’s fourth-graders are not significantly different from much of the country. Idaho scores significantly higher than 16 states, lower than 15 states, and about the same as the remaining 19 (Figure 4).<sup>5</sup>

In a limited international reading study, the United States performed above average, but below ten other countries/jurisdictions: Russian Federation, Hong Kong, Singapore, Luxembourg, Hungary, Italy, Sweden and three Canadian provinces (Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario).<sup>6</sup> Forty-five developed and developing countries participated in the test. U.S. fourth-graders had an average literacy score of 540, compared to the study’s average of 500.<sup>6</sup>

FIGURE 4. Differences in Average Fourth Grade Reading Scores between Idaho and Other States, 2009



Source: 2009 Reading Assessment, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), National Center for Education Statistics.

# Economic security: an additional challenge

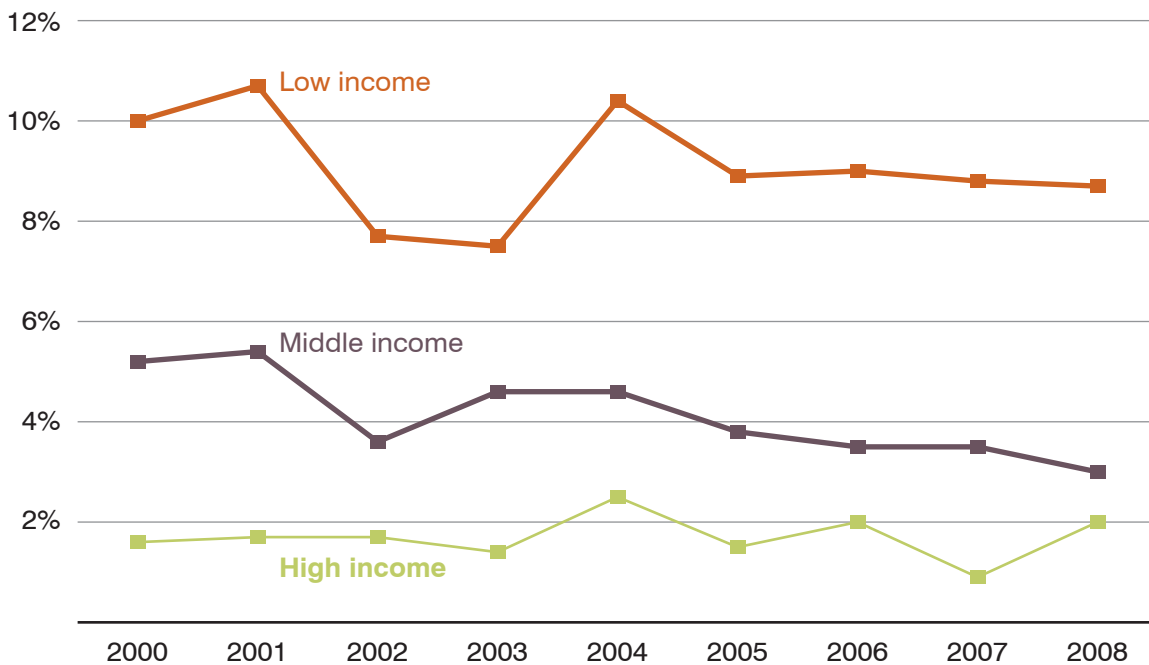
Fourth grade reading proficiency is a strong predictor of high school graduation and college attendance.<sup>2</sup> However, family income also plays a large role in academic success (Figure 5).<sup>7</sup>

As shown earlier (Figure 3), 79 percent of Idaho's low-income fourth-graders fail to read at grade level, compared to 59 percent of students from moderate and high-income families.<sup>3</sup> Twice as many of Idaho's low-income students fail to demonstrate even basic reading skills, compared to their more affluent peers. Research shows that low-income students who are proficient readers in fourth grade are three times more likely to graduate than other low-income students. However, they are still five times as likely to drop out compared to students who never experienced poverty.<sup>1</sup>

In low-income households, limited resources and additional family stressors undermine a child's capacity to learn. Low-income children are disproportionately affected by housing insecurity, frequent changes in neighborhoods and schools, health problems that interfere with learning, malnourishment, summer learning loss, and chronic absenteeism. They are also less likely to attend a high-quality preschool, after-school programs, and summer learning programs.<sup>4</sup>

These facts are concerning if we view education as the key to escaping generational poverty. The consequences are increasingly serious in Idaho, where the child poverty rate grew to 19% in 2010 from 14% in 2000.<sup>8</sup>

FIGURE 5. U.S. High School Dropout Rates of 15- to 24-year-olds by Family Income, 2000-2008



Source: Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2010.

# Closing the achievement gap

Addressing the achievement gap and improving reading skills across the board is a complex and daunting task. Research demonstrates, however, that children from all backgrounds can succeed with appropriate support and high-quality educational experiences.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation makes four main recommendations to dramatically increase the number of children who can read proficiently<sup>4</sup>:

**1) Develop a system that aligns and coordinates early care and education from birth to the third grade so that children are prepared to learn.** Such a system should track children along this continuum to ensure they are developing cognitively, socially, physically, and emotionally and are therefore prepared to succeed in school.

**2) Encourage and empower families and caregivers to play their critical role in producing good outcomes for children.** Parents need to read to and converse with their children from an early age, encourage children to read, ensure regular attendance at school, and find after-school and summer activities that promote literacy. Organizations that provide parental support and education play a critical role in ensuring children develop early literacy skills.

**3) Support results-driven initiatives to transform low-performing schools into high-quality teaching and learning environments.** Strong curricula, instruction, teachers and assessments will improve the quality of education within schools. Consistent measurement of student outcomes and educator effectiveness will reveal whether schools are reaching quality standards. In 2009, Idaho joined the Common Core State Standards Initiative, which encourages the implementation of rigorous standards.

**4) Develop solutions to two significant contributors to the underachievement of low-income children: chronic absenteeism and summer learning loss.** Schools and districts need to develop systems to track children with excessive absences and provide parent-centered interventions. Additionally, schools, libraries and community-based programs can be mobilized to provide language-rich summer learning opportunities.

Working together, families, child care and preschool providers, schools, libraries, community organizations and government agencies can ensure the future success of Idaho's children.

## Sources

<sup>1</sup>Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011.

<sup>2</sup>Reading on Grade Level in Third Grade: How Is It Related to High School Performance and College Enrollment? Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2010.

<sup>3</sup>2009 Reading Assessment, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), National Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>4</sup>Feister, L. Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters. A KIDS COUNT Special Report. Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010.

<sup>5</sup>National Assessment of Educational Progress, Reading 2009 State Snapshot Report: Idaho Grade 4 Public Schools.

<sup>6</sup>Provasnik, S., Gonzales, P., and Miller, D. U.S. Performance Across International Assessments of Student Achievement: Special Supplement to The Condition of Education 2009 (NCES 2009-083). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2009.

<sup>7</sup>Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2010.

<sup>8</sup>Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center. Available at [www.datacenter.kidscount.org](http://www.datacenter.kidscount.org).



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