



READING MATTERS

READ TO LEARN,
READ TO EARN

Preface

This report analyzes a key aspect of the reading proficiency challenge—reading ability by the end of third grade—addressing it from both a national and state perspective. The success or failure of efforts to increase reading proficiency will be critical to the social and economic welfare of our citizens, and to the state’s overall economic destiny.

The report summarizes efforts to address reading proficiency in Idaho, particularly those seen as successful and promising. It also presents potential additional approaches for Idaho that are supported by research. This information is not exhaustive, and Idaho KIDS COUNT will continue to analyze and assess such efforts.

Idaho KIDS COUNT is a nonpartisan research and policy center dedicated to informed policy decisions and improved outcomes for Idaho children. The organization is supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and is a project of Mountain States Group, Inc. Idaho KIDS COUNT thanks the Annie E. Casey Foundation for its support but acknowledges that the findings and conclusions presented here are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

A National Problem

How well children read by the end of the third grade often determines their future success or failure in school, work and society. The reason is that children learn to read up to third grade, and after that they read to learn. Reading is an essential tool in the learning process.

Educators and researchers have long recognized the necessity of learning to read by the end of third grade. Failure to master reading skills inevitably means students fall behind their peers, and numerous studies have linked this failure to higher dropout rates.

The High Cost of High School Dropouts

The high numbers—and costs—of high school dropouts are a tremendous problem in the United States. In 2007, nearly 6.2 million young people (16% of the 16–24 age group) were high school dropouts.¹ Every student who does not complete high school costs our society an estimated \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes and productivity.² The median annual income of a high school dropout in 2007 was \$23,000, compared with \$48,000 for someone who obtained a Bachelor’s degree or higher.³ High school dropouts are more likely to be arrested, have a child while still a teenager, or engage in substance abuse—all of which incur additional financial and social costs.

According to the KIDS COUNT Data Center, 6% of U.S. teens ages 16 to 19 were not in school and were not high school graduates in 2010. Idaho had 5,000 teens who were neither in school nor were graduates, or 5% of this population.

A Threat to International Competitiveness

Globally, the United States performs poorly against our trading partners and competitors in comparisons of reading achievement. Fourth-graders in 10 of 45 educational jurisdictions around the world who were tested in 2006 scored significantly higher in reading than their U.S. counterparts.

In an increasingly global and technological economy, employers are struggling to find enough educated, competent, and accountable workers. At the same time, community colleges and other institutions of higher education spend considerable time and resources on remedial coursework for students who are not prepared for post-secondary education despite having a high school diploma.

The education achievement gap leads to a productivity gap between the United States and other countries. McKinsey & Company estimates that if U.S. students had met the educational achievement levels of higher-performing nations between 1983 and 1998, America's gross domestic product (GDP) would have been \$1.3 trillion to \$2.3 trillion higher in 2008. In this sense, the education gap has "created the equivalent of a permanent, deep recession in terms of the gap between actual and potential output in the economy."⁴

A Threat to National Security

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson supported the Head Start program as an action taken in the national defense because too many young Americans could not pass the military's basic skills entrance test. We are at a similar point today: an estimated 75% of Americans aged 17–24 cannot join the U.S. military—26 million young Americans—most often because they are poorly educated, involved in crime, or physically unfit.⁵ Lack of a high school diploma is one of the top three reasons for ineligibility. More than one in five potential applicants fail the armed services entrance exam.

A Growing Consensus

These realities have led to a growing consensus around the need to invest in dropout prevention. However, the process of dropping out begins long before a child gets to high school. It stems from loss of interest and motivation in middle school, often triggered by having to repeat a grade and the struggle to keep up academically. A major cause of grade retention is a failure to master the knowledge and content needed to progress on time—and that, in a great many cases, is the result of not being able to read proficiently as early as fourth grade.

The pool of qualified applicants from which employers, colleges, and the military draw is too small, and still shrinking, because millions of American children get to the fourth grade without learning to read proficiently. And that puts them on the dropout track.

The resulting economic loss is staggering, and the current pool of qualified high school graduates is neither sufficiently large nor skilled enough to supply our nation's workforce, higher education, leadership, and national security needs.

The Nation's Report Card

If current trends hold, 6.6 million low-income children in the “birth to age eight” group are at increased risk of failing to graduate from high school on time because they will not be able to meet the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) proficient reading level by the end of third grade.

NAEP—often called the “Nation’s Report Card”—is the only measure of student achievement that allows student performance to be compared across states and over time. Of the U.S. fourth-graders who took the NAEP reading test in 2011, 68% failed to reach the “proficient” level in reading. This was unchanged from 2009. NAEP uses the following definitions for its three scoring categories.

Grade 4 NAEP Scoring Categories

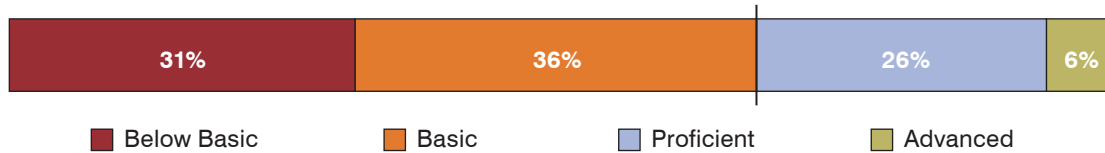
Basic	Fourth grade students performing at the basic level should be able to locate relevant information, make simple inferences, and use their understanding of the text to identify details that support a given interpretation or conclusion. Students should be able to interpret the meaning of a word as it is used in the text.
Proficient	Fourth grade students performing at the proficient level should be able to integrate and interpret texts and apply their understanding of the text to draw conclusions and make evaluations.
Advanced	Fourth grade students performing at the advanced level should be able to make complex inferences and construct and support their inferential understanding of the text. Students should be able to apply their understanding of a text to make and support a judgment.

NAEP also tracks the proportion of students who fall below the basic level.

How Idaho Scores

While it has been reported that “69% of students scored at or above grade level,” this number includes not only Idaho students scoring at or above proficiency, but also those at the basic level.⁶

Idaho’s 2011 NAEP Scores in Fourth Grade Reading



Only 33% of Idaho’s fourth grade students scored at or above proficient in reading, which is not significantly different than the 2009 results (32%).*

Proficiency is a more desirable standard because there is a significant difference in subsequent achievement between proficient and basic levels. Students at the basic level of achievement failed to graduate from high school at more than twice the rate of proficient readers (9% compared to 4%).⁷

Economic status plays an important role in the problem. Economic instability, limited resources and additional family stressors can undermine a child’s capacity to learn. In Idaho, middle and high-income children were more than twice as likely to read proficiently. Only 21% of students who were eligible for free/reduced-price lunch performed at or above proficient in 2011, compared to 44% of their peers.⁸

If Idaho’s poverty rate continues to rise, it will present additional challenges to ensuring reading proficiency levels across income levels. Idaho’s child poverty rate grew to 19% in 2010 from 14% in 2000, according KIDS COUNT Data. Very young children are especially vulnerable. Of Idaho children ages 0 to 5, 24% were living in poverty. This figure is 25% for the nation as a whole.

Why Do Children Fail to Read?

Several factors contribute to low reading proficiency. At a minimum, children must be ready to learn when they get to school: cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically. They need to be present at school because they cannot learn if they are not there. And they need to have high-quality learning opportunities, beginning at birth and continuing in school and during out-of-school time in order to sustain learning gains. For millions of American kids, these conditions are not met.

*Numbers may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Potential Approaches and Solutions for Idaho

Much is already known about how people learn to read and how to impart reading skills. Examples of many sterling programs exist around the country.

Idaho needs to adopt a clearly articulated, measurable, achievable goal: increase the number and proportion of children, especially from low-income families, who read proficiently by the end of third grade.

This report highlights four areas that are critical to improving reading proficiency:

- High quality instruction
- Access to quality early education
- Prevention of summer learning loss
- Prevention of chronic absenteeism

The following sections scan Idaho's efforts in these areas and make additional suggestions. This is not a comprehensive or definitive review of current efforts or potential approaches.

Early Literacy Project

Idaho's Lee Pesky Learning Center demonstrated the power of effective professional development with its Early Literacy Project. By training early education instructors in evidence-based teaching methods, the Center demonstrated significant gains in children's pre-literacy skills. In the first year of the study, 67% of the children who started 'at-risk' and had trained teachers finished 'strong' (according to the Get Ready to Read measure), compared to 20% of comparison 'at-risk' children. In the second year, 80% of 'at-risk' children with trained teachers finished 'strong,' compared to 18% of comparison children. This program is distinctive in that the teachers received in-class observation and coaching to practice the new teaching skills.

From 2008 to 2011, the Center trained 1,000 early educators who collectively serve over 8,000 children per year. The federal funding that supports this program is coming to a close, however, it provides a model for replication within the early grades of the K-12 education system and public preschool programs. A related course for instructors, Building Blocks for Literacy®, is available at no cost online.

High-Quality Instruction

Well-qualified, effective teachers are fundamental to student learning. Students taught by well-trained, experienced teachers achieve at demonstrably higher levels than students who have inexperienced or inadequately trained teachers. In fact, a recent report by McKinsey & Company shows that teacher quality is the main driver of the variation in student learning across school systems. Studies that take into account all of the available evidence on teacher effectiveness show that students placed with high-performing teachers progress three times as fast as those with low-performing teachers.

As researchers and academics have shown, teaching children to read *is* rocket science.⁹ Teachers must master a thorough knowledge of language structure and translate those concepts to young children. A skilled reading teacher must know how to weave together information from such areas of study as phonetics, phonology, morphology, orthography, semantics, syntax and text structure.

Children at risk of reading difficulties need the knowledge and guidance of an expert in reading pedagogy. Without adequate training or the help of a reading mentor, many teachers are unprepared to provide the full range of reading instruction young children require.

Potential approaches:

- **Ensure prospective teachers are adequately prepared in reading instruction.** In 1999, Idaho passed the Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Act (ICLA), which created minimum standards around coursework for prospective teachers and the ICLA test in literacy pedagogy. Teachers can also achieve an optional reading endorsement through additional coursework. The original legislation has not been revisited and the State Department of Education is considering phasing out the ICLA test in favor of the Praxis test, a national standardized test. Idaho's adoption of the national Common Core Standards may also require new standards.

These circumstances may give Idaho an opportunity to update its credentialing process. However, published studies do not provide clear evidence on what teacher credentialing should entail. It would be helpful to study whether Idaho's optional reading endorsement is associated with improved student outcomes, controlling for other factors (e.g. teacher experience and student socioeconomic status). While such a study cannot account for all the factors that affect student achievement, it may provide suggestive evidence about whether more extensive coursework in literacy pedagogy pays off.

- **Provide more rigorous ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers.** Quality professional development programs are ongoing and allow for practice, feedback, and follow-up support so that teachers can master new skills.¹⁰ These training efforts should be assessed, at least in part, through student learning and changes in classroom practice.

A survey of Idaho teachers suggests that professional development opportunities offer room for improvement.¹¹ Teachers cited lack of time as the biggest barrier to participating in meaningful professional development. Additionally, they described most professional development experiences as brief and lacking follow-up support for practice and feedback. A number of individual schools and districts in Idaho have implemented teacher professional development programs that research suggests are highly effective, such as team planning periods, grade-level collaboration, mentoring and case studies. Idaho could explore ways to scale-up the most successful professional development programs.



Courtesy of Scott Fenwick via PhotoShare

Access to Quality Early Education

Early education encompasses a variety of experiences, from reading and verbal stimulation in the home to formal preschool and early grade school. Early experiences prepare children to learn academic skills and—perhaps just as importantly—shape a child’s social and emotional development. Social and emotional skills are necessary for children to succeed in a school environment and include the ability to manage emotions, follow directions, take turns and stick with a task, among others.

Parents

There is no substitute for the parent or primary caregiver’s role as a child’s first teacher, best coach and most concerned advocate. This role is especially crucial during the infant and toddler years. However, many parents are unaware of how important early literacy and third-grade reading proficiency are to their children’s futures. Other parents may not have positive experiences to draw upon in helping their children succeed and feel supported by the school system. Unfortunately, we often take for granted that parents have the awareness, skills and supports they need to fulfill these obligations.

Vocabulary development by age three has been found to predict reading achievement by third grade. Preschoolers whose parents read to them, tell stories or sing songs tend to develop larger vocabularies, become better readers, and perform better in school. Children who lack this stimulation during early childhood tend to arrive at school with measurably weaker language, cognitive and memory skills. A recent report noted that 11% of children in Idaho ages 1 to 5 were read to less than three days per week by family members.¹²

Parents need to read to and converse with their very young children to instill language and vocabulary skills, encourage their children to choose reading as a free-time activity, and discourage ‘screen time.’ A significant body of research has found that high quality, relationship-based home visiting programs demonstrate an array of positive outcomes by educating parents in these areas. Parents involved in these programs engage in more language- and literacy-promoting activities with their children and are more involved with their children’s schooling. Children in these families are more advanced in language, problem-solving and other cognitive abilities, and social development. They also score higher on kindergarten readiness tests and in reading, math and language in the first through fourth grades.¹³

Preschool

Economists agree that preschool is a good investment for society and actually saves taxpayer dollars. Not surprisingly, preschool improves school readiness, which is predictive of later achievement. The Perry Preschool Project—which has now followed a group of students receiving preschool through age 40—calculates that every dollar invested in preschool yields an economic benefit of \$16.14. Of that return, \$12.90 benefitted society in general and \$3.24 benefitted the participant directly (through higher wages).¹⁴

Access to preschool is limited in Idaho and quality is variable. Only about 4,030 of the state's approximately 20,000 four-year olds have access to public preschool in the year prior to entering kindergarten. Thirty-five thousand Idaho children ages 3 to 5 were not enrolled in nursery school, preschool or kindergarten—50% of all children in that age group. Idaho ranks 44th in the nation in this regard, outperforming only six other states.¹²

In the 2010–11 Idaho school year, 21,675 children entered kindergarten. Approximately 57% of those students scored at the Benchmark level (formerly “At Grade Level”) on the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI). Twenty-five percent scored at the Strategic Level (formerly “Near Grade Level”), and 19% scored at the Intensive Level (formerly “Below Grade Level”). For the 21,713 children in the first grade, 63% scored at the Benchmark Level, 22% at the Strategic Level, and 15% scored at the Intensive Level.

This cognitive assessment suggests that 44% of children in Idaho are not ready for kindergarten and 37% of children are not ready for first grade. In addition, there are no agreed upon measures for non-cognitive skill development (persistence, reliability and self-discipline, etc.).

Potential approaches:

- **Expand access to high-quality home visiting programs.** These programs increase the capacity of parents to provide a strong foundation for literacy. The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare is launching new home visiting services under its Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting program. This program will implement several evidence-based models of home visiting services to pregnant women, infants, young children and their families. During the first two years, the program will roll-out in four counties (Kootenai, Shoshone, Twin Falls and Jerome). While this is an encouraging development, such services are needed across the state.
- **Increase the participation of child care providers in IdahoSTARS.** While many Idaho children under the age of five spend time in child care, there are no state standards to ensure that childcare experiences are educationally enriching. The voluntary program, IdahoSTARS, is the only statewide program that provides professional development to child care providers and assesses their services (using a star-rating system). Policies that increase participation in IdahoSTARS would likely increase the quality of early education experiences and school readiness.

The Idaho Child Care Program (ICCP) provides state-funded subsidies to help low-income families stay in the labor force, while covering the cost of child care. Currently, 30% of ICCP facilities are involved in the IdahoSTARS Professional Development System. Idaho could require that ICCP providers participate IdahoSTARS or encourage participation through higher reimbursement rates for achieving a star-rating.

- **Expand access to preschool.** Head Start, a program of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, provides comprehensive services in education, health, nutrition, family development, self-sufficiency and parent involvement to young low-income children and their families. In Idaho, Head Start programs are funded directly by the federal government and receive no state funds. Less than 5% of eligible pregnant women, infants, and toddlers—and only about 20% of the eligible 3 to 5 year olds—are enrolled in Early Head Start or Head Start. An estimated 20,000 to 25,000 Idaho children and families miss out on Head Start annually. Increasing enrollment in Head Start is one strategy to expand access to quality preschool.

Caldwell's P16 Project offers a model private-public partnership to improve access to preschool. The Caldwell School District, United Way of Treasure Valley, J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation, Lee Pesky Learning Center, and Treasure Valley Family YMCA have partnered to provide voluntary preschool to Caldwell's three and four year-olds in select Caldwell public schools.

- **Increase kindergarten participation rates.** In the spring of 2010, 19,217 kindergarteners took the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI). In fall 2010, 21,713 children took the IRI as first-graders. This suggests that more than 11% of this cohort did not participate in kindergarten and may not have been enrolled in any educational program.

Kindergarten is voluntary in Idaho and the short hours make it particularly difficult for working parents to get their children to and from school. Better transportation, linkages to after school childcare, and longer kindergarten hours may improve participation. In fact, full-day kindergarten has documented benefits. Children in high-quality, full-day kindergarten are more likely to be ready for first grade than children in half-day kindergarten, regardless of family income, parental education or school characteristics.¹⁵



Courtesy of José A. Warfetta

Prevention of Summer Learning Loss

Children of all socioeconomic groups make similar achievement gains during the school year, but research shows that low-income children fall behind during the summer by as much as two months of reading achievement. Summer learning experiences during the early years also substantially account for higher rates of placement in a college preparatory track, high school completion, and attendance at a four-year college.

According to the Idaho State Department of Education, 81% of low-income kindergartners were reading at grade level in the spring of 2009. When they returned as first-graders in the fall, only 57% were reading at grade level.

Summer learning programs may help some children gain reading skills; however nationally only 25% to 36% of children aged 6 to 11 attend summer learning programs. Unfortunately, the students who might gain the most from summer learning programs are the least likely to participate.

Idaho libraries had over 69,000 students participate in summer reading programs in 2011. The number of books read over the summer is associated with academic gains and libraries provide critical access to reading materials. Surveyed participants rated the programs highly, with parents reporting important attitude and behavior changes regarding early literacy with their children.

The design of Idaho's library programs, however, has not permitted rigorous evaluation of whether they directly improve literacy. Furthermore, not all children are able to access such programs. National research shows that programs to increase access to literacy resources actually *increased* the gap between low-income students and their peers. Low-income students had less access to adult or peer mentors who could help them use library resources, were more likely to gravitate toward reading materials at lower reading levels (with less print), and spent less time reading overall.¹⁶ More intensive and accessible programs are needed to prevent summer learning loss, especially for Idaho's low-income children.

Potential approaches:

- **Create and expand access to intensive summer learning programs designed for low-income children.** Research suggests that summer programs with the following program attributes may reduce summer learning loss: (1) academic classes with 15 students or fewer and more than two adults, (2) at least one experienced teacher per classroom, (3) academic content that complements curricula standards, (4) group learning complemented by individual support, and (5) hands-on activities that give a real-world context to the content. While Idaho has community organizations, such as the Boys and Girls Club, and public libraries that offer summer programs, few meet these standards. Increased academic rigor and better targeting of low-income students could make these programs more effective at curbing summer learning loss.

Prevention of Chronic Absenteeism

Too many children miss too much school. Chronic absence (missing 10% or more of the school year, for any reason) is a problem for 1 in 10 kindergartners and first-graders nationwide. Chronic absence matters because succeeding in school requires being in school. A child who isn't present isn't acquiring what he or she needs to know to succeed there. Chronic early absence can signal problems within the school or community or a parent's lack of knowledge that regular attendance matters.

Potential approaches:

- **Foster classrooms that engage children and encourage attendance.** Research suggests that teachers can combat absenteeism by: (1) offering education that responds to the diverse learning styles and needs of students, (2) engaging families of all backgrounds in their children's education, and (3) providing incentives for excellent attendance to all children (such as school supplies, acknowledgement, or extra recess time).¹⁷ For example, one third-grade teacher in Caldwell noticed remarkable attendance every Wednesday, when the class swim lesson was scheduled. Teacher performance evaluations could include an assessment of measures taken to promote attendance.
- **Adopt data systems to alert teachers and schools of attendance problems so that families can receive timely intervention.** When the Idaho State Department of Education fully rolls out a new longitudinal data system, educators and administrators will have a new tool to identify children with emerging attendance problems. Schools must be prepared to respond to families' needs with case management, health care assistance to address illness and obtain screenings, and/or referrals to organizations that can provide needed resources.
- **Implement legal measures for families in crisis.** Chronic absenteeism may stem from child neglect, chaotic households, and other types of family crisis. Legal responses, such as truancy courts, may help in these situations. Truancy courts can make parents accountable while bolstering parenting skills and providing needed supports to ensure children are at school and ready to learn. Idaho has successful model truancy courts that can be replicated throughout the state.

Year-Round Schooling

The consequences of summer learning loss beg the question of whether an alternative school calendar is the solution. Unfortunately, research on the impact of year-round schooling has generally been poorly designed. Many schools that showed improvements in student achievement also implemented extra supports for struggling students during the breaks. The gains in achievement may have been due to the extra support and not the modified calendar.

Some districts in Idaho have experimented with modified calendars. Surveys revealed that participants felt the modified schedule reduced winter burnout for teachers and that the students had less need for review. No systematic assessment of student achievement has been completed.

Summary

Idaho is dedicated to having a strong educational system that will prepare our children for successful futures, ensure economic opportunities come to Idaho, and keep our communities safe.

Far too many of Idaho's children cannot read proficiently, and the social and economic consequences for the state are considerable. Improving reading skills across the board and addressing the disparity between low-income students and their peers may seem daunting. However, researchers estimate that 95% of children can be taught to read successfully with high-quality educational experiences.¹⁸

To have the best start in life, children need the right supports in the home, school, and greater community. An effective plan to improve reading proficiency will rely on concerted efforts by a variety of stakeholders. While the challenge is substantial, solutions exist. Making third grade reading a state priority is critical to closing the achievement gap, curbing dropout rates, and ensuring that we have the skilled work force we need to compete in the global economy and protect our national security.



References

1. Center for Labor Market Studies (April 2009). "Left Behind in America: The Nation's Drop-Out Crisis."
2. Riley, R.W., and Peterson, T.K. (September 19, 2008). "Before the 'Either-Or Era': Reviving Bipartisanship to Improve America's Schools." Educational Week.
3. Planty, M. et al. (2009), The Condition of Education 2009 (NCES 2009-081). Washington D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, p. 41.
4. McKinsey & Company. (April 2009). The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools. Available at www.mckinsey.com/App_Media/Images/Page_Images/Offices/SocialSector/PDF/achievement_gapreport.pdf , pp. 5-6, 18.
5. Mission Readiness, Military Leaders for Kids (November 2009). Ready, Willing and Able to Serve". Washington, D.C.
6. State Department of Education, News Release "Idaho Students Excel in Reading Compared to Other States." November 1, 2011.
7. Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011.
8. NAEP 2011 Reading Report for Idaho. Page 40.
9. Oppenheimer, C. (2009). Connecticut's Early Care and Education Progress Report, 2009. New Haven, CT: Connecticut Voices for Children.
10. Kelly, P.P. (2003). Looking down the road: Idaho's new model of professional development. Perspectives. 21 pp. 5-7, 15, 19.
11. *ibid.*
12. EARLY WARNING! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters (2011) A Kids Count Special Report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.
13. Parents as Teachers: Research and Program Quality. Report from Parents as Teachers National Center.
14. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40. Lawrence J. Schweinhart, Ph.D , President, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.
15. Lee, V.E., et al. (2006). Full-day versus half-day kindergarten: In which programs do children learn more? *American Journal of Education*, 112, 163-208.
16. Neuman, S. B. & Celano, D. (2001). Access to print in low-income and middle-income communities: An ecological study of four neighborhoods. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36(1), 8-26.
17. Chang H.N. & Romero, M. (2008). Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades. Report from the National Center for Children in Poverty.
18. Moats, L.C. (1999). Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers.



Idaho KIDS COUNT
1607 W. Jefferson St.
Boise, Idaho 83702

Phone: 208-388-1014
Fax: 208-331-0267

www.idahokidscount.org