

Third grade is the “make or break” point for children to learn to read sufficiently to ensure their future academic success. By fourth grade, most children begin using reading skills to learn other subject areas. As a result, a student’s chances of graduating from high school can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by examining his or her reading level at the end of third grade. Students not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school.¹ The following other outcomes are associated with the third grade reading benchmark:

- Seven in ten (73 percent) of West Virginia third graders are reading at mastery level or above by the third grade.
- About 16 percent of children who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade do not graduate from high school on time, a rate four times greater than for proficient readers.
- For children who were poor for at least a year and were not reading proficiently by the end of third grade, the proportion failing to graduate rises to 26 percent.
- For children who were poor, lived in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, and were not reading proficiently by the end of third grade, the proportion jumps to 35 percent.
- Up to half of the fourth-grade printed curriculum cannot be understood by fourth graders because of their limited reading skills; consequently, achievement gaps widen as students progress through school.

***Progress Update:** In 2013, Governor Tomblin expanded the number of quality pre-kindergarten to full-day kindergarten programs to give young learners ample opportunities and assistance to develop literacy skills. In addition, he charged the State Board of Education with ensuring that all students can read by the end of third grade. Board actions thus far include a new testing requirement for elementary pre-service teachers to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to teach reading and the formation of the WV Early Childhood Planning Task Force. In October 2014, the Task Force issued its Development Plan with recommendations that address early literacy.*

Recommendations:

1. Require immediate, evidence-based interventions in PreK through third grade for struggling readers, especially in schools with high-poverty populations.
2. Establish a statewide reading assessment process as early as possible (pre-kindergarten or kindergarten) to identify struggling readers.
3. Create a sense of urgency among parents and educators around third-grade reading. Involve parents by informing them about their child’s reading proficiency, providing them with information on how to work with teachers, promoting partnerships with families that focus on language and learning, and partnering with local media outlets to create early literacy reading campaigns.
4. Adopt a holistic approach to improved literacy by increasing access/participation in early childhood programs, improving the quality of early childhood services and infrastructure, and strengthening the governance and financing of the early childhood system.

¹ Hernandez, *Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation* (Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011).