When Third Graders Can't Read

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The connection between early education and high-school completion has always seemed obvious to many of us who follow the research on how children learn. When children are immersed in high-quality early education and get the support they need to read by third grade, the chances are much greater that they will succeed in school.

A report published yesterday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation provides more evidence to back this up. The 15-page research brief, "Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation," analyzes data from a national study that tracked 3,975 students from their early elementary years through adulthood. It found that reading proficiency in third grade was a significant predictor of whether a student would struggle to finish high school.

Among proficient readers, only four percent failed to graduate, compared to 16 percent of those who are not reading at grade level in third grade, the report showed. Children with the lowest reading scores account for three-fifths of those who do not graduate from high school.

Living in poverty held children back too. When children grew up without financial resources while also struggling to read, they were less likely to graduate, putting them in what the report calls "double jeopardy." For children who were poor for at least one year and not reading on grade level in third grade, more than one-quarter (26 percent) didn't finish high school – a rate that is six times higher than that for proficient readers.

The study was not designed to identify and follow children who were born to teenage mothers, so the percentage of children in "double jeopardy" could be even higher. Presumably, those children would have an even greater chance of growing up in poverty and not gaining the benefit of preschool and other language-rich early environments that put them on a path toward reading proficiency.

The brief was written by Donald J. Hernandez, professor of sociology at Hunter College and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. Hernandez is also a senior advisor to the Foundation for Child Development. (Full disclosure: FCD is a funder of Early Ed Watch and the Early Education Initiative.)

With the Obama Administration's emphasis on "college readiness," the brief comes at an opportune time to ensure that policy changes within the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) are tailored to give children a strong reading foundation by third grade. It's time to prioritize dollars and resources to put the earliest years first by building strong systems of early learning for all children – and especially those in poverty – up through the third grade. PreK-3rd reform strategies are at the heart of the solution.

To learn more about PreK-3rd reform, see the Early Education Initiative's Next Social Contract paper, view some of our recent presentations, and check out our online discussion space on how to make better connections in programs for young children from before birth up through third grade. (All our PreK-3rd blog posts are archived here.)

The PreK-3rd listserv moderated by Kristie Kauerz at the Harvard Graduate School of Education is also an excellent resource. Kauerz highlighted parts of the "Double Jeopardy" report on the listserv yesterday. Are you plugged in yet? If not, send a message to prek-3rd@list.gse.harvard.edu with "subscribe" in the subject line.

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