

Interim Study on Grade-Level Reading **October 2014 - Overview**

Why is 3rd Grade Important?

- The transition from 3rd to 4th grade marks a shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.”
- Research shows that students with higher reading scores in 3rd grade are more likely to have higher scores in 8th grade and to ultimately graduate from high school.

Do Arkansas 3rd Graders Read Proficiently?

- **Benchmark.** According to the state Benchmark exam, the percentage of 3rd graders reading on grade level increased steadily from 57 percent in 2005-2006 to a peak of 81 percent in 2011-2012. The scores have dropped over the past few years to 77 percent in 2013-2014.
- **NAEP.** As the state transitions to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), the best measure we have for showing progress over the next few years is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is given in 4th grade. According to the NAEP, just 32 percent of 4th graders are reading on grade level. The disparities between racial and ethnic groups are large, but the gaps are shrinking. In 2013, 38 percent of white, 24 percent of Hispanic, and 15 percent of Black 4th graders read on grade level.

What Can We Do to Make Sure Our Children Are Ready for School?

Background

- **Brain Development Research.** Recent research on brain development from birth to age five has dramatically changed the way we approach early childhood education. Brain development related to vision, hearing, language, and higher cognitive functions peaks well before a child starts kindergarten.
- **ABC Outcomes.** Two studies on the Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) pre-K program in 2013 found that 1) children who attend ABC show improved scores in vocabulary and math through the 2nd grade and literacy through the 3rd grade, 2) pre-K is helping to close the education gap between low-income students and their more affluent counterparts, and 3) children who attended ABC were more prepared for kindergarten than children who did not attend.

Gaps and Barriers

- **Flat Funding for ABC.** ABC funding has not been increased since 2008, while the cost of living for K-12 state programs determined to be part of adequacy increased by 13.84 percent between 2008 and 2015.
- **Eligible Children Go Unserved.** With current funding for ABC and Head Start, only 56 percent of the state's income-eligible three- and four-year olds have access to quality pre-K.

Recommendations

1. Provide a cost of living adjustment for ABC pre-K funding.
2. Reassess the current ABC quality cost model.
3. Expand ABC to serve more children.

What Can We Do to Improve What Happens During the School Day?

Background

- **Struggling Schools.** When the new K-12 accountability system was put in place in 2011-2012, of the 548 elementary schools, 10 received a Priority designation, and 41 were classified as Focus schools. By 2012-2013, two of the 10 Priority Schools improved. The other eight schools maintained their Priority status. Seven of the 41 Focus Schools moved up to become Achieving Schools. Two schools closed, and the other 32 remained as Focus Schools.
- **School Attendance.** More than one in 10 kindergarten and 1st grade students in Arkansas are chronically absent, meaning they miss 10 percent or more of the school year. Chronic absence rates for children from low-income families are 2.5 times higher than children from higher income families. Half of all chronically absent students in 1st through 3rd grade are not reading proficiently.
- **Retention.** Some states have begun to implement test-based retention policies for students who do not read at a certain level by 3rd grade. Arkansas has an existing retention policy in law. The measures adopted in other states have had mixed outcomes depending partly on the amount of additional resources invested in retained students.

Gaps and Barriers

- **Improving Struggling Schools.** Arkansas schools designated as Focus or Priority often struggle to make improvements due to 1) not having the capacity to take advantage of Federal and State resources, 2) not making the personnel and financial decisions they need to move their schools forward, and 3) the ability of Priority schools to hire a fulltime person to focus on school improvement rather

than rely on assistance from a vendor who may be on campus just one day a week.

- **Inconsistent Attendance Data.** Over the past few years, the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) has worked with districts around the state on a transition to a new web-based data system, called E-school. The integration of all districts into the system will be completed in the 2014-2015 school year. As school and district personnel learn the new system, the transition has led to some inconsistencies in how attendance data is reported. For example, an analysis of data found that statewide chronic absence rates doubled between the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years, which is likely due to inconsistencies in data entry.
- **Retention is Expensive.** An Oklahoma analysis found that retaining between 2200 and 3200 students would have cost the state an additional \$18-\$25 million for the extra year of school the state would have to provide.

Recommendations

1. Conduct an ongoing assessment of the value of school improvement consulting expenditures by updating the 2012 Bureau of Legislative Research (BLR) report.
2. Request an ADE Commissioner's memo to clarify attendance reporting definitions and requirements and ongoing monitoring of data quality.
3. Refrain from adopting a mandatory retention policy.

What Can We Do to Improve What Happens After School and During the Summer?

Background

- **Parent and Community Engagement.** Parent and community engagement can enhance learning outcomes for children and consequently improve whole schools when it is part of an overall system of quality education. Merely opening the school doors for parent meetings is not sufficient. It takes careful planning and sustained effort to reach families who are hesitant about interactions with school personnel or busy working to support their families.
- **Summer Learning Loss.** Low-income students are more likely to experience summer learning loss than their higher income peers because they have less access to educational opportunities in their homes and communities. Low-income students can fall behind two to three months each summer, which by 5th grade can put them 2.5 to 3 grade levels behind their peers. Quality summer learning programs can help bridge the enrichment experience gap.

Gaps and Barriers

- **Parent Engagement.** In discussion groups conducted for this report, parents identified several barriers to parental engagement: 1) lack of knowledge about how schools and school districts operate, 2) belief that teachers and administrators do not have the cultural competence to understand and communicate with parents whose cultures are different than their own; 3) limited education and literacy skills, which can pose a barrier to helping their children with schoolwork; 4) schools reaching out to parents only when there is a problem; and 5) long travel distances to schools, particularly in rural areas.
- **Access to After-School and Summer Programs.** Only 12 percent of K-12 children in Arkansas participate in after-school programs, and 17 percent participate in summer learning programs.
- **Access to Books.** One way to improve the reading achievement of low-income children is to increase their access to books. Research indicates that having books in the home is twice as important as the father's education level. A 2006 study shows that while in middle-income neighborhoods the ratio of age-appropriate books per child is 13 to 1, in low-income neighborhoods the ratio is 1 book for every 300 children.

Recommendations

1. Develop an awards program for school districts with successful parent engagement models.
2. Require NSLA funds in Focus and Priority schools to be used for BLR-recommended solutions, such as summer and after school programs, and narrow the list of allowable activities under NSLA for all schools.
3. Provide funding to pilot the Positive Youth Development Act

For more information, see the [full Interim Study on Grade-Level Reading](#).