

The system of public (K-12) education is perhaps the greatest engine for opportunity in Colorado, so we have chosen building a solid base for literacy during the elementary school years as the next critical gateway to a life of opportunity.

The K-12 curriculum is based on the assumption that children will bring a set of increasingly advanced intellectual skills—academic building blocks—to each subsequent level of school. As we saw in the last section, even kindergarten teachers assume that children will possess a set of specific skills before they enter the public school system. If a student has not mastered literacy skills by the end of elementary school, his or her chances of later academic success—and all the opportunities which flow from that—decline significantly.





K-12 education receives a massive investment of public funds. Nationally, we spend more than \$350 billion on public K-12 education, and in Colorado we spent over \$3 billion last year—the single biggest item in the state’s budget.

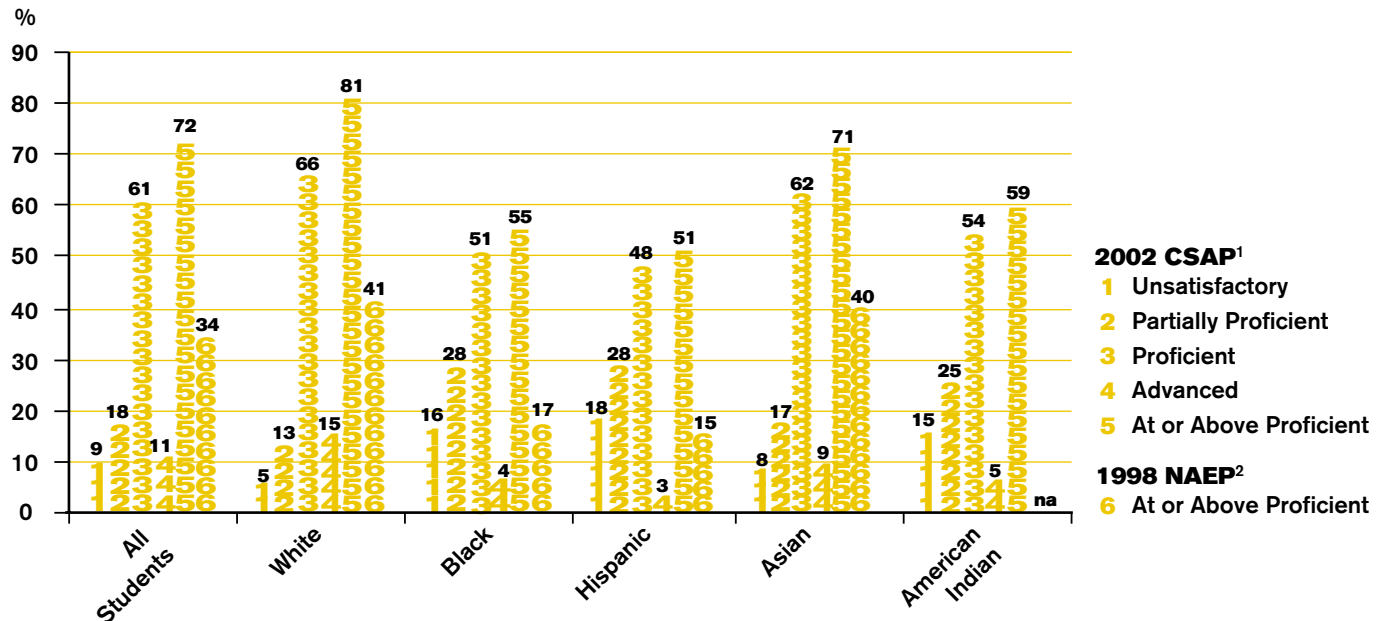
Indicator: Reading Proficiency in the Third and Fourth Grades

It has become a mantra of both educators and politicians that all children should be able to speak, read and write well (i.e. fluently) in

English by the fourth grade. So we have chosen English reading proficiency in the third and fourth grades as the best indicator of how well the state helps children build a solid base for literacy in elementary school.

Colorado has developed standards for how well children in third grade should be able to read. Based on these standards, the Colorado Department of Education has created a third grade reading assessment as part of the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP). In addition, every other year, the U.S.

Colorado Third and Fourth Grade Reading Test Results



Gateway 3 | Building a Solid Base for Literacy

Department of Education carries out the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test in reading at the fourth grade. Colorado has opted to have a large enough sample of its fourth-graders tested in order to produce state-level data.

According to 2002 CSAP results, more than one in four Colorado third-graders is not proficient in reading. The 1998 NAEP results were much worse, with two of every three Colorado fourth-graders below proficiency. In both cases, African-Americans and Hispanic students are far less likely to be proficient than their White peers. While these numbers have shown improvement in recent years, far too many of Colorado’s children—especially children of color—are falling behind during the first years of school.

Why is building a solid base for literacy in elementary school important to the Cycle of Opportunity?

■ The accrual of skills and knowledge is widely seen as the single greatest determinant of economic

opportunity, and all the benefits that come with income and wealth, in the United States.³ The overriding goal of the first four years of schooling is the development of literacy skills—especially reading, which is the major building block of education. Beginning in middle school and beyond, it is generally assumed students can read and write well, and they are expected to use these skills to learn other subject matter (e.g. history, science, geography).

■ The results of 35 years of high quality research—including studies that have followed young children into their adult years—has provided us with a stark picture of the long-term affects of not developing strong literacy skills early in elementary school.⁴

“. . .in many cases very bright youngsters are unable to learn about the wonders of science, mathematics, literature and the like because they cannot read the grade-level textbooks. By high school, these children’s potential for entering college has decreased to almost nil, with few choices available to them with respect to occupational and vocational opportunities.”

—G. Reid Lyon, National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development⁵





How do other gateways and barriers impact the literacy development of children?

The Cycle of Opportunity is operating in a number of ways to impact this period of early literacy learning:

- The literacy skills of children are directly related to the educational attainment and literacy skills of their parents and other caregivers in their immediate environment. For example, results from the NAEP have consistently shown that “the higher the level of parental education, the higher the level of student performance.”⁶ Low literacy is too often found to be an intergenerational problem within a family and, thus, a major barrier to opportunity.

- There are indirect impacts from other points on the Cycle of Opportunity, primarily mediated through a family’s income. For example, where a family can afford to live in Colorado affects what school their children will attend—and the resources dedicated to their education. There is strong research evidence that the concentration of poor students in a school is a particularly difficult challenge to overcome.⁷

- The American Institutes for Research (AIR) has demonstrated a powerful relationship between family income and reading ability in third grade. While some schools serving high percentages of poor children are achieving above the state average, the vast majority of such schools are struggling to help their students succeed.⁸

What are some of the state programs designed to provide elementary school students with a solid base for literacy?

- In 1996, the Colorado General Assembly passed the Colorado Basic Literacy Act, which states that every child should be reading at grade level by the end of third grade. The law also requires that the reading proficiency of every child in grades K-3 be assessed each year. An Individual Literacy Plan (ILP) must be developed for any student reading below grade level. The law also created a grant program—Read to Achieve—which provides funding to schools (\$19 million last year) to improve the literacy of students who have fallen behind.⁹

- The federal government provides Colorado several grants targeted at improving the literacy skills

of disadvantaged students. On July 1, 2002, the state will receive more than \$96 million of Title I funds designed to help low performing students in schools serving relatively poor communities. Most schools focus these funds on reading in the elementary grades. In addition, Colorado will receive more than \$9 million this year from a new federal program—Reading First. The purpose of Reading First is similar to the Read to Achieve program, but it is much more specific in how funds can be used to improve reading.

What else could Colorado do to ensure all children are proficient in reading by third grade?

■ **The state legislature should create and fund a program so that any parent who lacks a high school diploma or is not proficient in English and has a child with an ILP could choose to attend an adult basic education program.** Although the legislature passed a family literacy program in May 2002, it failed to fund it. Colorado is currently one of only a handful of states that provides no funding for adult basic education and family literacy.

■ Colorado needs to upgrade the skills of its teachers in the area of reading.

- Colorado should conduct a thorough study of the quality of training that prospective teachers receive in teaching reading at the state's colleges and universities.
- Every current elementary school teacher should be trained in the use of the best scientific research on effective instruction and demonstrate competency in teaching reading. Requirements for state licensure of elementary school teachers should be revised to confirm that teachers possess these competencies.
- Between the state and federal reading programs, Colorado has about \$25 million available each year to improve reading instruction. These different funding streams should be integrated so they work best for kids. The state legislature should amend the Colorado Basic Literacy Act and allow programs receiving both Read to Achieve and Reading First grants to combine the funds under one program.





- The provision of law allowing “emergency authorizations” for untrained elementary school teachers should be struck.

■ Between the CSAP reading tests and the literacy assessments required in grades K-3 by the Colorado Basic Literacy Act, we have a great deal of data that should lead to improved reading skills. Unfortunately, the value of that data is not being maximized. **The state legislature should amend the educational accountability portion of the state’s education laws to require: (1) disaggregated CSAP data (by income, race, ethnicity and sex) on school report cards; and (2) annual reports (beginning in kindergarten) to each parent and teacher showing individual student progress in reading over time.**

Where can I get more information about improving the literacy skills of children?

- Colorado Department of Education, Read to Achieve Program, www.cde.state.co.us
- National Institute for Literacy, Partnership for Reading, www.nifl.gov
- National Academy of Sciences, Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children, www.nationalacademies.org