



# Closing the Achievement Gap: Early Reading Success and Connecticut's Economic Future



Connecticut Association for Human Services



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# **Closing the Achievement Gap: Early Reading Success and Connecticut's Economic Future**

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# Chapter One

## The Importance of Reading Proficiency

**T**he ability to read is arguably an individual's most important asset. What happens when a child fails to learn the basic concepts of reading? Not only is the pleasure of picking up an interesting book lost, the potential to learn, find gainful employment, and contribute to society is diminished. Strong reading skills, particularly by the end of third grade, lay the foundation for success in high school, college, work, and life.

In 2009, almost 60 percent of Connecticut fourth graders scored below the proficient level in reading on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) test, the only standardized test in which all states participate—ranking Connecticut second best among the 50 states.<sup>1</sup> While it is good news that Connecticut ranks second, a 40 percent proficiency rate is cause for deep concern. A ranking of second illustrates that Connecticut students who have difficulty reading are not alone.

Despite the large percentage of Connecticut fourth graders who are not reading proficiently, researchers estimate that 95 percent of *all* children can be taught to read at the proficient level.<sup>2</sup> Connecticut's literacy target should reflect this finding. It is our responsibility to make sure this literacy goal is met and successful reading policies and programs that already exist in the state are brought to scale.

### Why Children's Reading Ability Should Be a Major Public Policy Issue

For decades, a child's ability to learn and succeed in school was considered the province of parents and the child's immediate community. Children who fell to the bottom of the class were of little interest to the world at large. When Connecticut's economy depended primarily on manufacturing, this *laissez faire* philosophy worked well enough for businesses in the state. There were plenty of candidates for the semi-skilled jobs that were in abundance.

As industry becomes more technological, and we compete with other states and countries, our economy can no longer afford our indifference, nor can our children. Although Connecticut is known as a highly educated state, our reputation is also growing as one with the largest gap in fourth-grade standardized test scores, based on race/ethnicity and income.<sup>3</sup> According to demographic projections, Connecticut's future workforce will be made up largely of young adults who fall on the low end of this achievement gap.<sup>4</sup>

*Closing the Achievement Gap: Early Reading Success and Connecticut's Economic Future* provides a close look at what we want children to know and be able to do as young readers and as members of Connecticut's future workforce. In order to close the gap, state policymakers, school administrators, teachers, and parents must work together to implement coherent educational policies and practices.

Chapter One of *Closing the Achievement Gap* includes descriptions of the pre-literacy and reading milestones children should reach. Chapter Two looks at Connecticut's fourth-grade reading scores and policies and programs implemented to develop strong readers. Recommendations are included at the end of Chapter Two.

Educationally, Connecticut is at a crossroads. Just as the United States can no longer assume educational primacy in the world, Connecticut can no longer assume our students are academically in a league of their own. In fact, Connecticut is falling behind. As recently as 1998, Connecticut's fourth-grade students ranked first in the country in reading and math.<sup>5</sup> Between 2002 and 2009, fourth graders in other states were gaining ground. Since 2002, Massachusetts students have out-scored Connecticut fourth graders in reading for all years except one.<sup>6</sup>

Connecticut must rebuild its past educational advantage by closing the achievement gap. An investment in people who are the back bone of the current and future economy is necessary to move the state in a positive direction. Despite the unprecedented economic downturn, Connecticut leaders must balance their attention to state revenue and spending with the need to resolve this fundamental quality-of-life issue our residents continue to face.

### An Excerpt from *Teaching Reading IS Rocket Science*

Consider what the classroom demands of the teacher. Children's interest in reading must be stimulated through regular exposure to interesting books and through discussions in which students respond to many kinds of texts. For best results, the teacher must instruct most students directly, systematically, and explicitly to decipher words in print, all the while keeping in mind the ultimate purpose of reading, which is to learn, enjoy, and understand. To accommodate children's variability, the teacher must assess children and tailor lessons to individuals. She must interpret errors, give corrective feedback, select examples to illustrate concepts, explain new ideas in several ways, and connect linguistic symbols with "real" reading and writing. No one can develop such expertise by taking one or two college courses, or attending a few one-shot in-service workshops...Although reading is the cornerstone of academic success, a single course in reading methods is often all that is offered most prospective teachers.<sup>9</sup>

Source: Moats, L.C. (1999). *Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science*. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers.



### It Takes a Community to Teach Reading

Learning, in general, and reading in particular, are sparked by social connections. Parents, caregivers, and teachers each have an important part to play in a child's reading development. Family income, a mother's education, and learning as a family value are pivotal influences on how and when a child is exposed to the precursors of reading—being read to before bedtime, having many books at home or from the library, and going to high-quality preschool.<sup>7</sup> For those children who miss out on early learning opportunities, catching up with their peers by third grade is a long, sometimes impassable, road. While some fourth-graders are reading to learn, others are still learning to read.

As researchers and academics have shown, teaching children to read IS rocket science.<sup>8</sup> Teachers must master a thorough knowledge of language structure and be able to 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. In order for *all* children to become strong readers, Connecticut needs more teachers who are knowledgeable in reading pedagogy, administrators who establish a reading culture in schools, and parents who know how to support their children's early reading success.



## Grade-Level Reading: Where Do We Expect Fourth Graders To Be?

Third grade is the time when the foundations of reading are becoming rooted in many children. Up until third grade, children are still learning the pre-requisites—recognizing one or two-syllable words, learning to write according to how words sound rather than how they are actually spelled. Children’s life experiences are still not rich enough for them to understand complex plots. By the end of third grade, many children begin to feel comfortable with reading, they know the types of books they like to read, and they will read by themselves.

Without a strong foundation in reading and writing, children can fall behind as academic material becomes more complex. Reading intervention for children who come late to literacy must infuse them with a solid understanding of phonics, spelling, and comprehension skills. This intervention must be comprehensive and tailored to each child’s needs. If intervention does not happen or does not take hold by third grade, grades plummet, frustration rises, and a child becomes disengaged from learning. Research shows that students who are held back or who drop out of school are often those with poor reading skills.<sup>9</sup>

## *Reading Difficulties Can Extend Beyond the Individual Child*

Children attending school where the majority of students are from low-income families and are generally doing poorly academically are more likely to have reading and other academic problems. This phenomenon is called the “Matthew effect”<sup>10</sup> and refers, in the case of poor reading ability, to accumulated disadvantage.

The theory applies two ways in this context. First, children who have problems reading typically continue to fall farther behind because they don’t practice and don’t polish their skills. Second, children are affected by the success or failure of those with whom they attend school. Children of average intelligence who attend high performing schools will perform better than children of similar intelligence who attend low-performing schools.<sup>11</sup>



### Organic Causes of Reading Difficulties

Physical and neurological impairments can negatively affect a child’s ability to read. Reading difficulties are associated with cognitive deficits, hearing impairment, developmental delays or disabilities, early language impairment, and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. While physical and developmental issues may account for some reading difficulties, the objective of this report is to highlight the external factors that cause difficulties among young children learning to read.

Source: Show, C.E., Burns, M.S., and Griffin, P., Editors. (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. Report from the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

## A Road Map for the Optimal Development of Grade-Level Reading

### *Literacy Starts at Birth*

Researchers familiar with the brain development of babies tell us that the youngest children have the physical capability to learn about basic language far earlier than once thought. In fact, the first three years of life are the very time when teaching pre-literacy skills is the most effective.<sup>12</sup> The development of oral language is the foundation of reading and writing.<sup>13</sup>

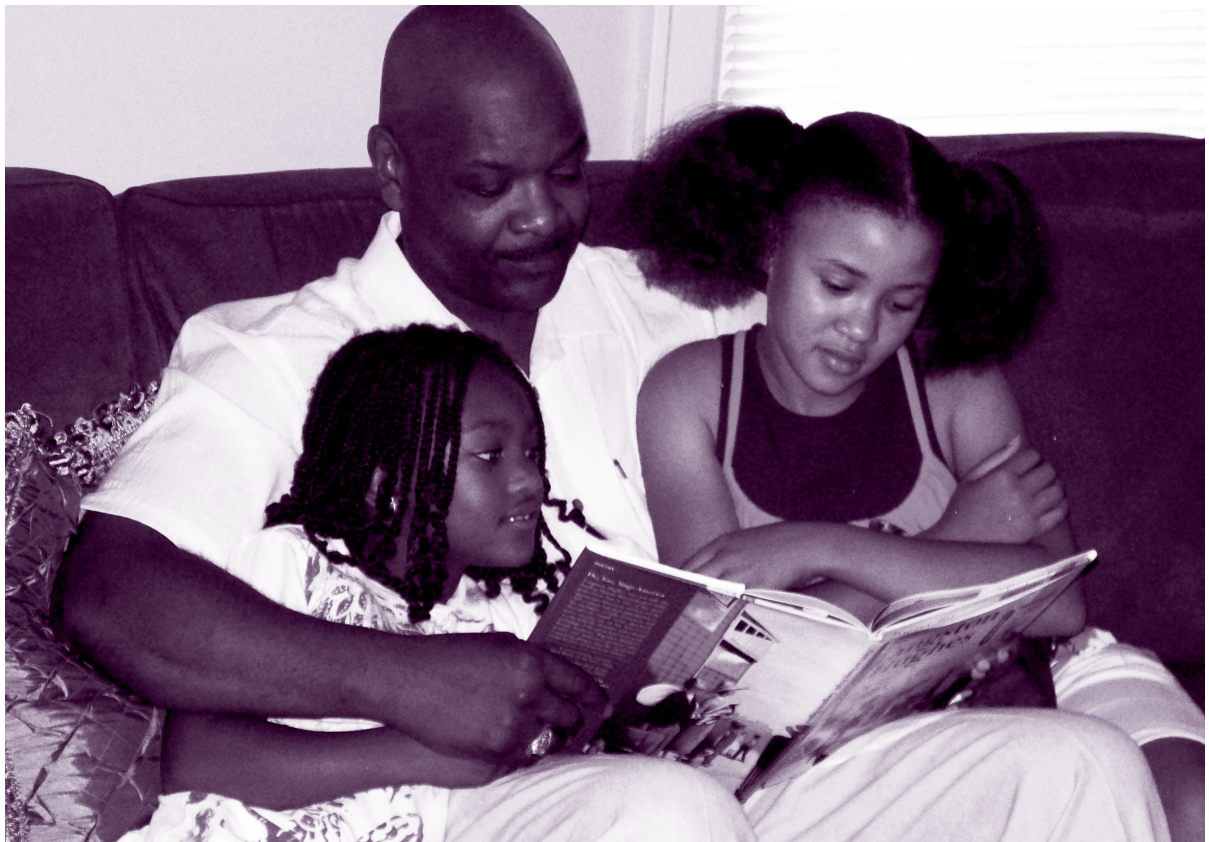
### *Parents as First Teachers*

Children's natural curiosity comes alive when parents or caregivers read simple stories and talk to them about the pictures they see, pointing to animals or objects, providing names, and talking about letters and sounds. A toddler mimics this naming game by pointing to each person and thing in the child's environment. Exposure to children's books, learning how a printed story unfolds from cover to cover, and seeing the connection between words and pictures prepares the child for future learning. It is intentionality on the part of adults that creates an early start to literacy development.<sup>14</sup>



### *High-Quality Preschool*

Children in high-quality preschools are surrounded by a language- and print-rich environment. Picture books of all sizes are on low, open shelves in reading areas furnished with comfy chairs, inviting little ones to explore books on their own. Dramatic play areas are filled with clothes, hats, and other objects,



allowing children to make up and act out their own stories. Cabinets, cubbies, and other furniture are labeled so children can become used to seeing the printed names of objects they know. Storybooks are read by teachers. Hearing stories read out loud has been found to positively influence children's later language skills and reading comprehension.<sup>15</sup>

### *Kindergarten*

So many things come together for children in the realms of language comprehension and word recognition when they reach kindergarten. If a child missed out on early learning at home or in preschool, kindergarten should be the place to catch up to peers. A skilled teacher informally and formally assesses what each child knows and does not know and creates a welcoming environment for new learning.

### *First through Third Grades*

Once in first grade, children move from emergent to conventional writing, correctly spelling short words consisting of one or two syllables. First graders are able to correct themselves when they make a mistake in identifying a word that doesn't fit the context of an age-appropriate story. They understand simple written instructions. All of this happens by continuing the work of word recognition and language comprehension that began in preschool. Each year stories become a little more complex, more parts of speech are introduced, and more work is done translating ideas into writing.

In second grade, children progress to sounding out multi-syllable words, discussing characters and events in simple stories, and becoming more aware of punctuation and literary forms and patterns. Their own stories become more descriptive, with uncomplicated character development and subplots.

### ***Rocket Science. . . How Skilled Teachers Teach Reading***

The relationship between a teacher and a child, particularly one in which the teacher exhibits warmth and an open communication style, is thought to positively affect a child's future achievement. Teachers must understand each child's reading difficulties in order to apply appropriate interventions.

In preschool, teachers engage children in 'dialogic reading'—that is, having a conversation about a book, asking open-ended questions about characters in the stories they read. "Why do you think Clifford did that?" "What do you think he'll do next?" "Has that ever happened to you?" In this way, preschool teachers engage children beyond literal thinking, connect ideas with experiences, and begin the process of inference. Building verbal reasoning is fundamental to reading comprehension.

For students with poor language comprehension, teachers use classroom conversations to model the use of complete sentences and introduce new words in meaningful contexts. To establish how speech maps onto letters, teachers play with language, singing nursery rhymes, showing children letters, and breaking down words into vowel and consonant sounds.

A skilled kindergarten teacher will work with children on letter-sound correspondence, using familiar nursery rhymes like "Jack and Jill went up the hill." Children are taught to follow each sound of words on a page with their finger, pointing as the phrase is read out loud. Starting out as rote mimicry, the child parrots and points until eventually the child internalizes what is known as the alphabetic principle.

Teachers in early elementary grades begin to assess whether or not children understand what they are hearing and reading. The best way for that to occur is by having children retell stories in their own words. If a child is unable to competently provide details of simple characters and story line, a teacher must determine why. Does the child have a problem with reasoning? Is vocabulary too limited to describe what they read? Are they unable to identify unknown words through the process of decoding? To understand what intervention is needed, a teacher must be an accomplished diagnostician.

Source: Strickland, D.S. and Riley-Ayers, S. (2006). *Early Literacy: Policy and Practice in the Preschool Years*. Preschool Policy Brief. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research; Gillis, M.B. (2010). Personal communication. June 11, 2010. Discussion of reading comprehension and applied interventions.

## Reading Instruction in the Context of Children's Lives

A child's capacity to learn and excel in school is affected not only by the quality of teaching but also by other factors such as family stress, good nutrition, and health. To provide support for children's social and educational development, public education has come to include a number of services to assist children and their families. These include on-site social workers, school-based health clinics, wrap-around after-school programs, and referrals to community-based programs. While we acknowledge the importance of these services, *Closing the Achievement Gap* focuses exclusively on the content and delivery of reading instruction.



By third grade, children read chapter books independently, discuss motives and themes, and are able to monitor their understanding of what they read. Students now write short reports as they are able to find information in nonfiction books and use multiple sources written for their grade level.

Though language, reading, and writing are not fully developed by the end of third grade, it should be clear whether or not a child is having problems academically. For those who are struggling, special attention from the teacher, help at home, and individualized interventions will be critical.

## Factors That May Contribute to Reading Difficulties

Several factors unrelated to intelligence or physical/developmental ability may cause children to have difficulty reading.

### *Family and Home Environment*

Research indicates that many risk factors for poor reading success are associated with family income and home environment. Each has major implications for public policy. Children found to have difficulty reading often come from families in which one or both parents have or had reading problems themselves.<sup>16</sup> Children from language-poor families often are less engaged in verbal interactions than their peers and are less likely to hear uncommon words at home. Words in a language-poor environment are often used for punitive reasons rather than to stimulate the child's vocabulary knowledge.<sup>17</sup> This effect seems more to do with the amount of communication between parents and children than the quality of interaction. It appears from research that an increased amount of adult-child talk raises the number of vocabulary words a child is exposed to, which greatly aids reading comprehension.<sup>18</sup>

Children from families whose first language is not English can have difficulty learning to read, particularly if they have not become fully fluent in their first language before reading instruction in English begins.<sup>19</sup>

### *The School Environment*

Schools and districts vary in funding and resources, which has a direct impact on the quality and quantity of reading material available for students. Children make progress in literacy when they have access to a number of books, both fiction and nonfiction, that are age-appropriate and appeal to the interests and background of each child.<sup>20</sup> Schools that lack stimulating material for young readers or limit children's access because of a limited quantity may be replicating the lack of access that the child from a low-income family already experiences.

Children at risk of reading difficulties, particularly those who enter school without exposure to pre-literacy opportunities, need the knowledge and guidance of an expert in the field of reading pedagogy. Without support from adequate pre-service and in-service training or the help of a reading mentor, however, many teachers are unprepared to provide the full range of reading instruction young children require.<sup>21</sup>

## English Language Learners and Reading

Children for whom English is not their first language can have difficulty learning to read. While *Closing the Achievement Gap* does not focus on the needs of English language learners (ELLs), the learning needs of these children deserve special note.

Debate persists about bilingual and immersion programs for young ELLs. While research is still needed to verify the full effect of various interventions, existing research indicates success from two particular methods of teaching—either teaching children to read in their native language before they are instructed in reading English or conducting reading instruction in both English and the children's native language simultaneously.

The language of instruction, however, is only one consideration to ensure reading and academic success for ELLs. As with all children who are at risk of reading difficulties, the quality of instruction is important. In addition, many non-English speaking children exhibit the constellation of risk factors known to negatively impact reading ability in all children. These include: (1) parents who themselves have difficulty reading in English or the family's native language, (2) low family income, (3) attendance in low-income schools of poor quality, and (4) cultural differences in the value of education between school and home.

Whichever methods are chosen for reading instruction, teachers and school administrators must take into consideration the instructional needs of individual students while understanding the strong link between language and literacy development.<sup>33</sup>

Source: Slavin, R.E. and Cheung, A. (2003). *Effective Reading Programs for English Language Learners. A Best-Evidence Synthesis*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University; Snow, C., Burns, S. and Griffin, P. (1998). *English Language Learners and Reading Difficulties. Reading Rockets*. Web site.

## Leadership and Culture – Changing the Education Paradigm

No one solution exists to solve the grade-level reading problem. Through systemic reform rather than magic bullets, school administrators and teachers across the country are proving that almost every child can learn to read proficiently.<sup>22</sup>

Many layers of effort have to be synchronized for overall reading improvements to occur, including the following:

- All teachers and administrators must truly believe that all children can learn to read and then be willing to invest time and energy to reach that goal.
- School policies must be clear, consistent, and supportive of teaching and learning.
- Principals must be engaged with both children and teachers and establish a culture of reading and academic success in their schools.
- Superintendents and principals don't have to be experts in reading but they must know the fundamentals. They must have access to reading professionals who are effective and can translate the process of reading instruction to the teaching staff. Superintendents and principals must make high quality teaching a priority.
- Principals must understand the process of becoming an effective teacher and be willing to work with teachers in their development.
- A district or school's philosophy of reading (i.e., whole language versus an emphasis on phonics) is not so important if principals and teachers use frequent informal and formal assessments to see where children are failing or need support and augment instruction to improve those skills.
- Teachers and administrators must be aware of patterns of learning and focus attention on problem areas experienced by individuals and groups of students in order to target instruction appropriately.

- Professional development must include explicit instruction in all aspects of reading and writing pedagogy, including methods for dealing with typical problem areas for young readers. In particular, teachers must understand the process of decoding written English and be able to strengthen every child's ability to identify letter-sound correspondences and new words.
- Teachers must be given every opportunity to succeed and support the success of their students. This includes providing reading mentors to support teachers in the classroom.<sup>23</sup>

Translating these elements to districts and schools across the state becomes the responsibility of state administrators and the State Board of Education. It is the responsibility of the highest-level administrators to develop a concrete analysis of what it will take to create strong readers, establish priorities and mandates that will support a systemic overhaul, and ensure that fiscal resources and professional development are put in place to complete the process. Local control, while an important consideration in delivering educational services, must not be allowed to stand in the way of this fundamental objective.

## Chapter 1 Highlights

- Researchers estimate that 95 percent of all children can be taught to read at proficient levels.
- In 2009, slightly more than 40 percent of Connecticut fourth graders scored at the proficient level or better on the NAEP test, ranking Connecticut second among the 50 states.
- Teachers must master a thorough knowledge of the science of reading that includes language structure and the ability to translate those concepts to young children.
- The science of reading includes aspects of phonetics, phonology, morphology, orthography, semantics, syntax, and text structure.
- Children who fail to read at grade level by third grade rarely catch up to their peers.
- School factors that can negatively affect a child's ability to read include: poorly performing schools, schools with limited resources, and poor reading instruction.
- Family factors that can negatively affect a child's ability to read include: parents who themselves have reading problems or limited education, low-income, and a first language that is not English.
- Committed leadership is needed at the state, district, and school levels to improve the reading ability of all children.

## Endnotes

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# Chapter Two

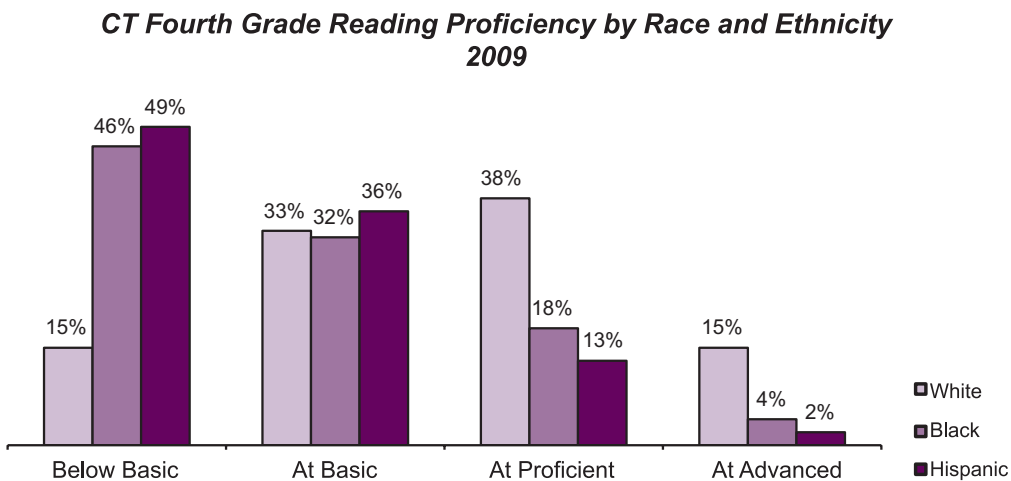
## Getting Connecticut's Early Readers on Track

Connecticut's results on fourth grade reading from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) present a mixed picture. As noted in Chapter 1, approximately 40 percent of Connecticut's fourth grade readers scored at the proficient level or above in 2009, ranking the state second behind only Massachusetts; the percent of Connecticut fourth graders who read at the proficient level far exceeded that of the country overall (32 percent).<sup>1</sup>

Our most vulnerable children—the growing population of children of color and those educated in urban districts—are performing very poorly. Although 52 percent of White fourth graders scored at or above proficiency in reading, only 22 percent of Black and 15 percent of Hispanic fourth graders did so in 2009 (Figure 1). Connecticut tied with Iowa for 5<sup>th</sup> place and Indiana for 13<sup>th</sup> place for the percentage of Black fourth graders and Hispanic fourth graders respectively who reached proficiency (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup>

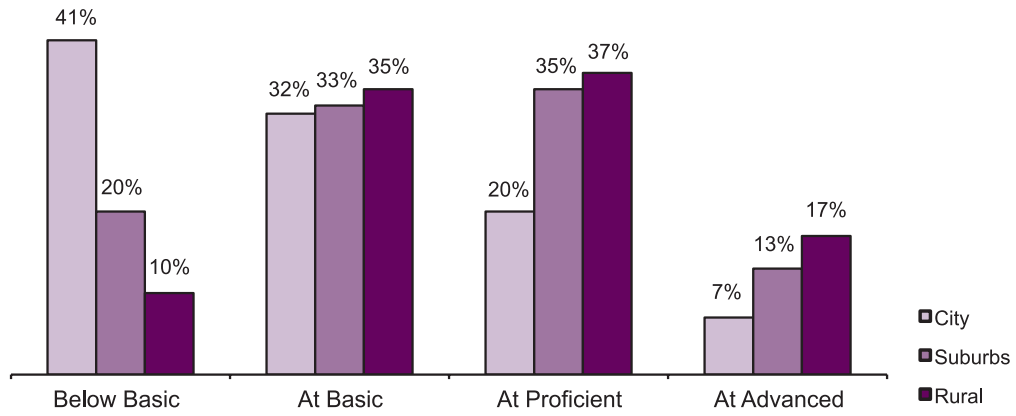


Only 27 percent of fourth-grade students in Connecticut's city districts, compared to 48 percent of those in the suburbs, and 54 percent of those in rural districts scored at or above proficient in reading in 2009 (Figure 2).



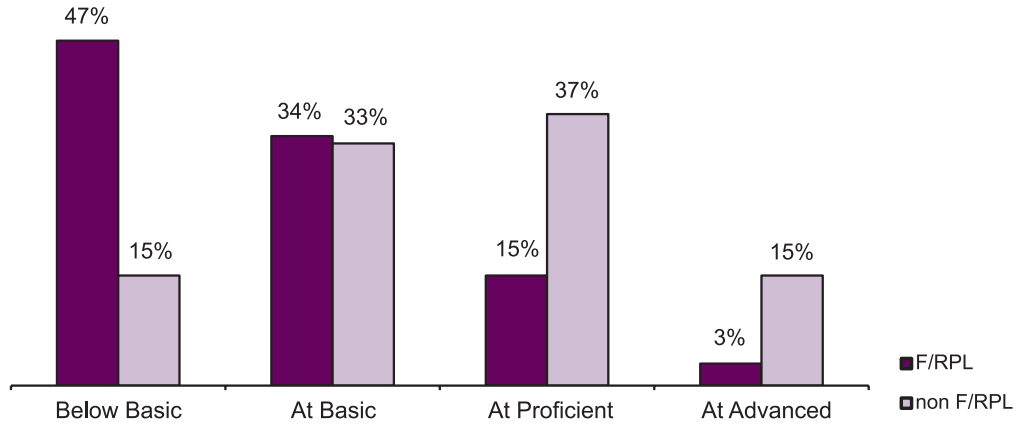
**Figure 1.** National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). National Assessment of Educational Progress. Connecticut data. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

**CT Fourth Grade Reading Proficiency by Geography  
2009**



**Figure 2.** National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). National Assessment of Educational Progress. Connecticut data. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

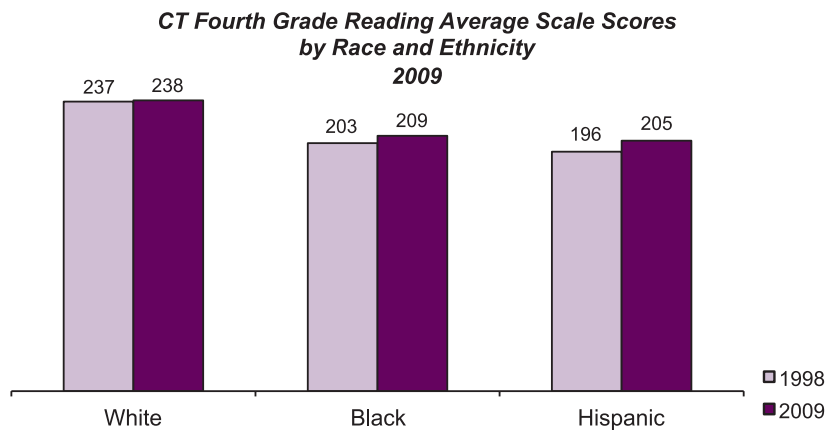
**CT Fourth Grade Reading Proficiency by School Lunch Eligibility  
2009**



**Figure 3.** National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). National Assessment of Educational Progress. Connecticut data. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

Almost twice as many fourth graders eligible for free or reduced-price school meals failed to meet proficiency as those with income above the program cutoff point (Figure 3).

Looking at the average reading scale scores by race and ethnicity, Connecticut Black and Hispanic fourth graders showed improvement over time. Between 1998 and 2009, Black fourth graders raised their NAEP average reading scores by six points and Hispanic fourth graders raised theirs by nine points (Figure 4).<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 4.** National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). National Assessment of Educational Progress. *Connecticut data*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

### Connecticut's Blueprint for Reading Achievement

*Connecticut's Blueprint*, published in 2000 by the Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) and the Connecticut Early Reading Success Panel, is the state's best kept secret for eliminating reading difficulties for the majority of Connecticut children in kindergarten through grade three.<sup>4</sup>

As the severity of Connecticut's achievement gap became increasingly apparent, the Connecticut General Assembly, SDE, and the Connecticut State Board of Education began to investigate

the situation in earnest. The impetus for this effort came primarily from the Connecticut Commission on Children, a body created by the Connecticut legislature to bring together state government with the public and private sectors to work on behalf of children.

*Connecticut's Blueprint* cites national reading research and articulates the competencies teachers and children must develop. The *Blueprint* establishes the components that should be put in place if the state truly wants to elevate the reading skills of children.

### Why Look at NAEP Scores?

- The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) is an assessment of overall achievement of populations of students by grade and by subgroup. It does not measure individual, school, or district performance.
- NAEP results provide information about the relationship between student achievement and other variables such as gender, race/ethnicity, disability, English language learning, socioeconomic status, region of the country, type of school location, and auspice of school (public versus private).
- NAEP provides information on improvement or decline in groups of students and the achievement gap.
- Since 2003, NAEP reading and math scores have been used as alternative measures of state educational progress under the No Child Left Behind Act.
- NAEP scores cannot be compared with Connecticut Mastery Test scores as NAEP topics and questions are independently developed by the National Assessment Governing Board and are not reflective of state standards or curricular reforms.
- NAEP is the only standardized test that is taken by a portion of students in every state and so provides comparative data on the performance of states and the nation.

Source: Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). *Mapping 2005 State Proficiency Standards onto the NAEP Scales. Connecticut Context*. Hartford, CT: Author; Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). *NAEP in Connecticut: How are schools selected?* Hartford, CT: Author; Savoie, R. (2010). Personal communication. April 16, 2010. Discussion of NAEP testing in Connecticut.

If *Connecticut's Blueprint* were used as the foundation of reform in every district across the state, with adequate resources and professional development for all K-3 teachers, principals, and school librarians, Connecticut could move closer to achieving reading proficiency for all children.

### First Words, First Steps

Connecticut's Early Childhood Education Cabinet was established by state statute in 2005 with the charge of developing a multi-year strategic framework to ensure the school readiness and early academic success of all Connecticut children. As its first line of work, the Cabinet's focus was on the expansion of the state's existing School Readiness program (see page 15). The Cabinet's document *Ready by 5 and Fine by 9* articulated this framework.

To supplement the recommendations contained in *Ready by 5*, the Cabinet created a working group to focus on the developmental needs of infants and toddlers. The working group's report *First Words, First Steps: The Importance of the Early Years* included a series of recommendations for the development of a coordinated family and early literacy system.<sup>5</sup>

### Connecticut's Efforts to Improve Reading Scores and Reduce the Achievement Gap

Connecticut's State Department of Education (SDE) and other stakeholders have developed a number of elements necessary to deliver improved NAEP scores for low-income children and those of color. The list of Connecticut initiatives cited here is by no means complete. Inclusion does not constitute an endorsement. Rather, the policies and programs noted are illustrative of the effort that is being made on behalf of children. SDE should catalogue federal, state, district, and philanthropic programs and funding streams that are currently dedicated to reading improvement.

## Connecticut's Blueprint for Reading Achievement

Conclusions reported by the Connecticut Early Reading Success Panel include the following:

- Reading instruction in the primary grades must effectively develop a wide range of competencies in children.
- Primary teachers must know how to adapt reading instruction to meet individual differences.
- High-quality reading instruction in the K-3 years can prevent many reading difficulties from developing.
- Primary-level language instruction must involve explicit, systematic teaching in five skill areas: (1) word-identification, including phonics and phonemic awareness; (2) fluent and accurate word identification in context; (3) comprehension; (4) spelling; and (5) writing.
- Primary reading instruction must include opportunities for children to read widely in a variety of interesting texts appropriate to their grade and to individual children's reading levels.
- In order to teach a wide range of children effectively, primary-level teachers must have adequate resources, both human and material.
- School districts, boards of education, parents, and communities all have important roles to play in ensuring that children learn to read.
- Schools of education must provide prospective teachers with adequate preparation to teach reading well to children with diverse needs.
- Effective teacher education requires ongoing professional development as well as rigorous pre-service preparation.

Source: Connecticut State Department of Education. (2000). *Connecticut's Blueprint for Reading Achievement: A Report by the Early Childhood Reading Panel*. Hartford, CT: Author.

## School Readiness

Research has convinced policymakers and the public that an investment in quality early childhood education for three- and four-year old children provides them with a solid educational foundation. The return on investment for quality early education programs is now estimated to far exceed most other publicly funded economic investment strategies, according to James Heckman, an economist and Nobel Prize winner from the University of Chicago.<sup>6</sup>

Since 1997, Connecticut has administered state-supported preschool programs, known as School Readiness, for three- and four-year olds in the state's Priority School Districts and Competitive School Districts.<sup>7</sup> Though Connecticut policymakers increased spending for School Readiness from \$38 million in 2002 to \$63 million in 2008, Connecticut's 2008 expenditure was 17 percent less than the amount recommended by the Governor's Early Childhood Research and Policy Council in its document called *Connecticut's Early Childhood Investment Plan*.<sup>8</sup> It is estimated that enrollment in School Readiness almost doubled between 2002 and 2009, from 5,953 to 10,584.<sup>9</sup>



In 2007, the Governor's Early Childhood Research and Policy Council estimated that an additional 12,944 slots were needed to serve all Priority School District children living in families with income under 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Level—the goal the Connecticut Early Childhood Cabinet had set early in its effort. By 2009, only 2,013 of the additional 12,944 children were served.<sup>10</sup>

### **First Words, First Steps: The Importance of the Early Years** **Infant Toddler Working Group, CT Early Childhood Education Cabinet**

#### ***Recommendations for an Integrated, Coordinated Family and Early Literacy System***

- Create a coherent and coordinated early literacy strategy to reverse the reading crisis in Connecticut. Utilize research-based practices in developing a continuum of strategies from birth to third grade.
- Develop training opportunities for parents and child care providers on how children learn to talk, develop vocabulary, and learn proficient oral language skills.
- Facilitate reading programs in state prisons so that both fathers and mothers can read to their children and give them books when they visit.
- Include parents as partners in their child's education through support of opportunities and enhancement of family literacy skills such as Reach Out and Read in pediatric practices.
- Promote two-generational early literacy strategies that include both the child and parent through home visitation programs, libraries, child care providers, pediatricians, and Birth to Three programs.
- Expand the role of public libraries in outreach strategies to parents with infants, toddlers, and two-year-olds, and informal and formal child care.

Source: Infant Toddler Working Group of the Connecticut Early Childhood Education Cabinet. (2008). *First Words, First Steps: The Importance of the Early Years*. Hartford, CT: Connecticut State Department of Education.

### *Preschool Benchmarks and Assessment Guidelines*

In 1999, in consultation with a small group of early childhood education researchers and practitioners, SDE's Bureau of Early Childhood Education published *Connecticut's Preschool Curriculum Framework and Benchmarks* (PCF) and *Preschool Assessment Framework* (PAF), groundbreaking documents for the early care and education field. Both documents lay out the content standards and program goals in each child development domain served by early education—physical, social, emotional, and cognitive—all of which come into play with the development of pre-literacy skills. Connecticut's *Pre-kindergarten to Grade 8 Curriculum Standards for English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies* includes performance outcomes in reading and language development that are aligned with the performance standards in those subjects contained in the PAF and PCF and so provides an instructional bridge for teachers and administrators working across the early childhood and elementary school continuum.<sup>11</sup>

### *Early Reading Success Legislation: 1998*

The Commission on Children was instrumental in gaining passage of Connecticut's Early Reading Success legislation in 1998, which along with support for reading instruction, included provisions for full-day kindergarten and reduced class size. State implementation funding was attached to the legislation.

Coupled with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education, Connecticut's Early Reading Success funding was awarded to Haskins Laboratories, a nationally renowned reading and literacy research lab associated with Yale University. With the combined funding, Haskins conducted a research-to-practice feasibility study, entitled the *Early Reading Success Initiative (ERSI)*, to apply reading research to grades K-2 reading instruction. In 2003, Haskins was awarded a four-year Teacher Quality Grant from the U.S. Department of Education for development of *Mastering Reading Instruction (MRIn)*. Between 2004 and 2006, Haskins' literacy specialists provided professional development and classroom

mentoring to 120 first-grade teachers in 37 schools across nine Connecticut school districts. From this work, *Haskins Literacy Initiative (HLI)* was developed to expand ERSI and MRIn into pre-kindergarten and all elementary grades. Close to 50 district reading specialists and hundreds of classroom teachers have been trained through these three initiatives.<sup>12</sup>

In several Connecticut school districts the effect of the *Early Reading Success Initiative* is still being felt as principals and superintendents continue to focus on reading improvements and to fund reading mentors. For example, in Bridgeport, mentors are available for K-3 teachers, summer school classes continue for students in first through third grades despite cuts to education, and curriculum changes made under ERSI are being maintained.<sup>13</sup>

### *Full and Extended Day Kindergarten*

In an effort to further reduce the achievement gap, SDE and over half of Connecticut's school districts (94 out of 167) have instituted full-day kindergarten for some or all children in the district. In addition, 31 districts now have extended day kindergarten programs, which fall between full-day and traditional half-day programs.<sup>14</sup> To encourage more districts to provide full-day kindergarten, Connecticut funds those programs at the same level as first grade.<sup>15</sup>

### *Connecticut Foundations of Reading Test*

One of the most recent efforts to reduce the academic achievement gap is the state administrative requirement that prospective teachers applying for an Integrated Early Childhood, PK-3 Endorsement, or Elementary Education Grades K-6 Endorsement must pass a test in reading instruction and knowledge. The Foundations of Reading test is closely aligned with the reading standards presented in *Connecticut's Blueprint*, noted previously. Connecticut Foundations testing began during the second half of 2009.

Among the areas tested are understanding of phonological awareness, concepts of print, the alphabetic principle, the role of phonics in promoting reading, word analysis skills and strategies, vocabulary development, and comprehension skills and strategies. First-round test results showed uneven pass rates for teacher candidates from Connecticut teaching institutions.<sup>16</sup>

### *The Connecticut Commission on Educational Achievement*

In March 2010, Governor Rell established The Connecticut Commission on Educational Achievement to investigate the causes of and potential solutions for the achievement gap. Under the administration of the Connecticut Office for Workforce Competitiveness, members include representatives from the business, philanthropic, and education sectors. Financial support for the Commission comes from private sources.<sup>17</sup> The Commission held public hearings and interviews with key stakeholders around the state in spring 2010. No date has been set for the Commission to report its findings.

### *Historic Education Reform Legislation*

Connecticut passed an historic education reform bill during the 2010 legislative session—Public Act Number 10-111, An Act Concerning Education Reform in Connecticut. Passage was partly driven by a number of substantive education reform requirements mandated in the federal Race to the Top competitive funding application. The following are those provisions of the public act that impact grade-level reading.

- Expands the state’s public school information system to include data on teacher performance,
- Establishes a teacher evaluation program which will include multiple indicators of student performance,
- Allows the creation of “innovation” schools in Priority School Districts established by teachers’ and administrators’ units or outside entities.

### **Connecticut Foundations of Reading Test First Round Results**

| Teacher Training Program     | Total Test Takers | Total Passed | Percent Passed |
|------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|----------------|
| Teach for America            | 31                | 29           | 94%            |
| University of Connecticut    | 27                | 25           | 93%            |
| Fairfield University         | 12                | 10           | 83%            |
| University of Bridgeport     | 68                | 55           | 81%            |
| Sacred Heart University      | 83                | 64           | 77%            |
| University of New Haven      | 66                | 47           | 71%            |
| Southern CT State University | 96                | 57           | 59%            |
| St Joseph College            | 37                | 21           | 57%            |
| Central CT State University  | 83                | 46           | 55%            |
| Eastern CT State University  | 85                | 46           | 54%            |
| Western CT State University  | 10                | 5            | 50%            |
| Mitchell College             | 13                | 4            | 31%            |
| <b>Total</b>                 | <b>584</b>        | <b>380</b>   | <b>65%</b>     |

Source: ConnCAN. 2010. *The State of Connecticut Public Education: A 2009-2010 Report Card for Connecticut Public Schools and Public Policies*. New Haven, CT.

- Grants the commissioner of SDE the authority to reconstitute the local or regional board of education for school districts that are deemed low performing and in need of improvement for two consecutive years.
- Grants local or regional boards of education for schools that have been identified as needing improvement or as low achieving the authority to establish a governance council for that school. The council, among other things, would develop a school compact with parents related to the ways the school and parents can build a partnership to improve student learning. The governance council can also recommend the reconstitution of its schools.

Connecticut did not qualify for Race to the Top funding in either the first and second round.

### *Philanthropic Literacy Initiatives*

Several of Connecticut’s philanthropic leaders have become involved in efforts to alleviate the academic achievement gap and improve reading scores. **Hartford Foundation for Public Giving’s *Brighter Futures Initiative*** funded a three-year project to improve grade-level reading in select Hartford schools, among other objectives. *Brighter Futures* engaged *Haskins Literacy Initiative (HLI)* to provide professional development and in-class mentoring to teachers in five Hartford schools. Data from the project show significant and large positive differences in reading levels of students who attended schools that participated in *HLI*. For example, in May 2009, 59 percent of first graders in *HLI* schools scored at the proficient level on the Developmental Reading Assessment 2 (DRA2), while only 40 percent were proficient among students attending non-*HLI* schools. The DRA2 is a standardized reading test that measures accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.<sup>18</sup>





The **William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund**, based in Hamden, and the national **Annie E. Casey Foundation** are partnering on a project that provides funding to improve literacy in a Connecticut district that has been identified as “in need of improvement” by SDE. The district must be participating in the Memorial Fund’s Discovery Community initiative.<sup>19</sup> New Britain has been awarded funding for two years to: (1) improve learning at home prior to preschool; (2) expand the use of preschool language assessments to identify children who need extra help; (3) align preschool, kindergarten, and early elementary language and literacy curricula; (4) improve language and literacy instruction in preschool through third grade through enhanced professional development and in-classroom coaching; and (5) address the particular needs of the 59 percent of the city’s children who live in homes where English is not the primary language.

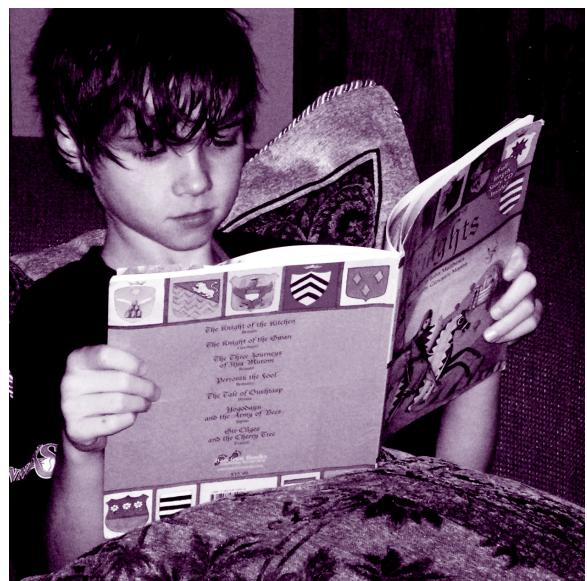
**The United Way of Coastal Fairfield County** has established three *Schools of Hope* based on the United Way-funded initiative of the same name located in Dane County, Wisconsin. *Schools of Hope* focus on improving reading ability for children in kindergarten through third grade. Principals from each of the three Fairfield County schools, in conjunction with United Way staff and evaluation consultants, have put together plans for reaching their literacy goal. Each school’s plan is unique as it is developed with the needs of the school’s children in mind. The project is funded in part by the **JPMorgan Chase Foundation**. Evaluation data are not yet available.<sup>20</sup> United Way of Coastal Fairfield County also created a Children’s Book Drive Initiative with *Read to Grow* (see next page) to ensure that children throughout the county grow up in literacy-rich homes.<sup>21</sup>

### *Statewide and Regional Organizations and Grade-Level Reading*

A number of organizations are working to improve children’s literacy and to close the achievement gap. Among them are the following.

- The Business Council of Fairfield County released a 2006 policy brief, entitled *Connecticut’s Reading Crisis*. Based on a concern for the ability of business and industry in the state to remain competitive and fill high- and middle-skill jobs, the report includes the following recommendations: the state and every district/community must commit to the goal that every child read proficiently by the end of third grade; schools of education must provide teaching candidates with adequate preparation to teach reading well to children with diverse needs; principals must provide effective leadership to bring about required systemic change; the state must fund a Center for Reading Excellence to provide leadership in implementing effective reading instructional practice; and Connecticut must invest in high-quality, literacy-rich preschool for three- and four-year olds. (Website: <http://www.businessfairfield.com/> )
- ConnCAN (Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now), a statewide nonprofit research and advocacy organization working for education reform, advances the tenets of greater choice, accountability, and flexibility in education policies and programs. ConnCAN elevates best practices among Connecticut schools and school districts and works to inform the public and policymakers about the need for education change. ConnCAN was one of the first organizations to publicize that Connecticut has the largest academic achievement gaps based on income and race/ethnicity. (Website: <http://www.conncan.org/>)

- Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding (CCJEF) is a nonprofit organization that seeks to achieve adequate and equitable funding in PK-12 education in the state of Connecticut. Much of the organization's work has focused on the inequity of funding public education through local property taxes. The Coalition filed a law suit, *Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding v. Rell*, in 2005 against the State of Connecticut, which argues that the state fails to maintain a suitable and substantially equal education system. The plaintiffs' argument was founded on variations in test scores, teacher experience, graduation rates, and numbers of resources among school districts. In March 2010, the State Supreme Court agreed with the plaintiffs and sent the case back to Superior Court for trial.<sup>22</sup> (CAHS is a member of the Coalition.) (Website: <http://ccjef.org/>)
- The State of Black Connecticut Alliance (SBCA) is a coalition of stakeholders working across the state to build a high quality of life for the Black community. The Alliance's work includes advocacy and public education for improved government and education accountability. Most recently, SBCA was the primary voice behind the movement to give parents a place at the table for school reform. Language to that effect was incorporated into Public Act 10-111, An Act Concerning Education Reform in Connecticut (see Historic Education Reform Legislation above). (Website: <http://www.stateofblackct.org/>)
- Read to Grow is a statewide, nonprofit organization that works with parents to improve the literacy outcomes for children. Working with eight Connecticut hospitals, Read to Grow provides parents of newborns with a literacy bag that includes a book and information about language development, pre-literacy, and attachment. Books are given to children whose families are unable to afford the cost of book purchases and are supplied to programs that work with low-income families with young children. (Website: <http://www.readtogrow.org/>)
- We Will Read is a statewide group of concerned parents and others who are working to improve policies and programs of children at risk of poor reading outcomes. (No website available.)



## Recommendations

Closing the academic achievement gap should be among Connecticut policymakers' highest priorities. Building on *Connecticut's Blueprint for Reading Achievement* and national reading research findings, the following steps can improve the likelihood of fourth grade reading success for all children and narrow the gap. These recommendations are especially important for the populations of children with the lowest test scores, including children in low-income families and communities and students of color.

1. Commit fully to the elimination of the academic achievement gap by passing legislation and funding for a new Grade Level Reading Initiative. Legislation must be targeted specifically to reading improvement and include a strong evaluation component.
2. Establish the Early Reading Success Institute proposed under Public Act 99-227.<sup>23</sup> Charge the Institute with developing a plan, cost estimates, and time line for the implementation of the Connecticut Blueprint at the district level.
3. Establish literacy coaches for teachers to support pre-literacy, reading classes, and developmentally appropriate practices in all schools that serve preschool through grade four children. Literacy coaches should have a master's degree in reading instruction and extensive knowledge in the science of teaching reading.
4. Review reading curricula at Connecticut public universities and colleges with the goal of revamping and improving the knowledge and ability of prospective teachers so that they are able to pass the Connecticut Foundations of Reading test with honors.
5. Fully fund school readiness programs for all three- and four-year-olds in families with income less than 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, beginning with Priority and Competitive School Districts.<sup>24</sup>
6. Support the pre-literacy of Connecticut children under the age of three by providing parents with information on what they can do to begin the language learning of their youngest children.
7. Provide free materials, DVDs, and classes about pre-literacy and the role of teachers to all caregivers caring for and teaching infants, toddlers, and pre-schoolers.

Connecticut leaders, in the public policy and education arenas and in the private sector, have started the process to improve reading success for children across the state. To compete successfully in the global economy for decades to come, we must act with urgency and fully utilize our relatively abundant resources. Connecticut needs a plan of action that will capitalize on successful programs and initiate creative solutions where none currently exist. Connecticut is doing a number of things well. It's imperative that we ramp up our reform efforts to eliminate the achievement gap and ensure that all of the state's children are competent readers for their well-being and that of our economy.

## Endnotes

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- 19 Discovery Communities of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund aim for educational success for all children by increasing parent participation and inclusive decision making at the local level. Discovery communities develop comprehensive birth to age eight plans for the delivery of early childhood education and K-3 education. Currently, 53 communities are involved in the process.
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