

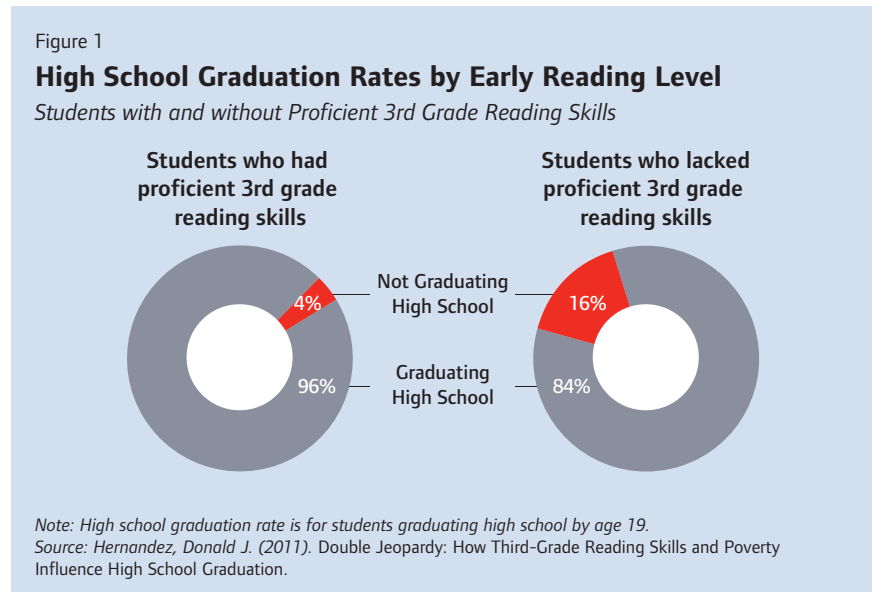
Expand Access to High-Quality Early Learning Programs

High-quality early learning and reading programs build a critical foundation for future educational achievement. Studies show that children who attend high-quality early childhood education programs are more likely to excel in school, graduate from high school, stay out of trouble and earn higher wages than those who do not attend such programs.¹ Children who do not read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade are four times more likely to drop out of school by age 19 than students who read at or above their grade level.² Unfortunately, millions of young children in the United States continue to struggle to read at grade level, with 33 percent of all 4th graders nationwide — including half of African-American and Hispanic 4th graders — reading at below basic levels.³

While the evidence is clear, the path forward is not. Under severe budget constraints, states reduced funding in early childhood programs more in 2012 than in any previous year.⁴ At the federal level, the Administration supports universal prekindergarten, but Congress remains divided. Large budget deficits limit funding options, and concerns remain about significantly increasing funding for Head Start, child care, prekindergarten and other programs when results are mixed because of varying quality.

Policy Solutions

The Business Roundtable supports voluntary access to high-quality early childhood programs, as well as financial assistance that enables participation by low-income children who are most at risk of starting school behind their peers. The Roundtable also supports proven policies and programs that focus on all students reading proficiently by the end of 3rd grade. The following policy solutions will help support these goals and improve early learning:



- (1) **Increase and Expand Access to High-Quality Prekindergarten Programs:** Federal, state and local policymakers should increase the number of and expand access to high-quality prekindergarten programs.⁵ Assessments of children’s progress provide important data to improve teaching, evaluate student readiness for kindergarten and measure program quality.
- (2) **Encourage Family Engagement:** Federal, state and local policymakers should support involvement by parents or other adults with parental responsibility, who ultimately serve as a child’s first teacher. Parents and guardians should have easy access to data and information on program quality to help them make informed decisions.

(3) *Require Early Screening of Children*: States should require early screening to identify and support children who are at risk or are already exhibiting signs of developmental delays.

(4) *Target Funding for Effectiveness*: When making difficult choices about funding, federal and state policymakers should consider a wide range of options:

- Invest in expanding access to only high-quality programs;
- Refocus Head Start on low-income infants and toddlers (ages 0–2), particularly given research on early brain development;
- Develop federal/state partnerships that enable children from low- and middle-income families to participate in high-quality early childhood programs by using a sliding scale payment system that is tied to family income;
- Offer innovative funding to incentivize results (e.g., social impact bonds that are premised on their predicted ability to pay for themselves by reducing future costs);
- Eliminate costly regulatory barriers that prevent coordination among federal, state and local funding; and
- Shift free public education to prekindergarten through 11th grade, with the goal of educating children earlier while still providing 13 years of free education. Under this model, the 11th grade would serve as the final year of high school.

A CEO Perspective on Early Learning

“The decision about whether to invest in quality early childhood education is easy. It’s a simple choice: Pay now or pay more later.”

— Edward B. Rust, Jr., Chairman & CEO,
State Farm Insurance Companies

(5) *Allow for Data Sharing between Early Childhood and K–12*: State policymakers should build data systems that early childhood providers and teachers in the early grades can use to track student progress and improve school readiness and success in grades K–3.

(6) *Improve Reading Proficiency*: States should require all students to read at grade level before beginning 4th grade. To ensure that students are able to meet this requirement, policymakers and educators should focus on proven policies and practices, including high-quality prekindergarten programs, research-based reading practices to prepare prekindergarten through grade 3 teachers, policies that reduce chronic absenteeism and extended time for students who need extra help to develop their reading skills.⁶

¹ The Pew Charitable Trusts (2010). *The Costs of Disinvestment: Why States Can't Afford to Cut Smart Early Childhood Programs*. April 2010. Available at http://www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_report_detail.aspx?id=56874.

² Hernandez, Donald J. (2011). *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*. Annie E. Casey Foundation. April 2011. P. 3. Available at <http://www.aecf.org/Newsroom/NewsReleases/HTML/2011Releases/~media/Pubs/Topics/Education/Other/DoubleJeopardyHowThirdGradeReadingSkillsandPoverty/DoubleJeopardyReport040511FINAL.pdf>.

³ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2012). *Reading 2011: National Assessment of Educational Progress at Grades 4 and 8*. Figure 3, p. 10, and Figure 8, p. 15. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2011/2012457.pdf>.

⁴ Barnett, W.S., M.E. Carolan, J. Fitzgerald, and J.H. Squires (2012). *The State of Preschool 2012: State Preschool Yearbook*. National Institute for Early Education Research. Available at <http://nieer.org/publications/state-preschool-2012>.

- ⁵ For example, policymakers also should consider interventions, such as home visits, that have research-based positive outcomes. See, for example, Sheldon, Steven B., and Joyce L. Epstein (2004). "Getting Students to School: Using Family and Community Involvement to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism." *The School Community Journal*. Vol. 14. No. 2, pp. 39–56. Available at <http://www.adi.org/journal/fw04/Sheldon%20&%20Epstein.pdf>.
- ⁶ For example, in Florida, an emphasis on early reading that identifies students who need extra help from preschool through 2nd grade, as a way to prevent 3rd grade retention, has proved particularly effective for English language learners. All Florida public school students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch scored well above average on international and national reading tests. Available at <http://excelined.org/news/florida-leads-international-student-literacy-test/>.