



Low Rates of Reading Competency Hamper the Nation's Economy

by Thale Dillon

My children are quiet. Very quiet. In fact, I have not heard a peep from them for quite some time. This is usually cause for concern, so I tiptoe down the hall and peek into my son's room, ready to catch him and his sister in the act of who-knows-what. But when I stick my head in the door, my 5-year-old son looks up at me with a big grin on his face: "Annika is teaching me to read!" He makes it sound like the most fun he's had all day! My daughter, who at 7 is reading at 4th grade level, is too busy reading to even acknowledge the interruption.

Little do they know that being accomplished readers is one of the most important markers for future academic and economic success. They are happily unaware that many children struggle to learn how to read and continue struggling until they graduate from high school (or drop out), barely literate. It is entirely possible, here in the United States, to graduate from high school without knowing how to read.

In fact, according to a report issued by the Annie E. Casey Foundation of Baltimore,

"The current pool of qualified high school graduates is neither large enough nor skilled enough to supply our nation's workforce, higher education, leadership, and national security needs."

The report goes on to remind readers that the Head Start program was supported by President Lyndon Johnson as a national defense measure because "...too many young Americans could not pass the military's basic skills entrance test." That was in 1965.

Forty-five years later, the United States continues to face a situation where low rates of reading competency impact the future of the country, not just in terms of national security issues, but also "...in terms of individual earning potential, global competitiveness, and general productivity."

In Montana, finding qualified workers, both skilled and entry-level, has been a prevalent problem for business owners for years. While the lack of skilled workers is a problem in itself, the lack of qualified entry-level workers perpetuates the problem. There will be no one to get trained and no one to acquire more specialized skills. Without a skilled workforce, new businesses will be loath to establish themselves in the state, while existing ones will be unable to stay open.

Over the past decade or so, the issue of reading proficiency has been promoted by a conglomerate of supporters, from President George W. Bush and “No Child Left Behind” to the most recent call to action from the Annie E. Casey Foundation in the form of its report “Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters.” The proficiency focus is set at a fairly early grade level, with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing reading proficiency at the end of 3rd grade.

Why so early? The way our public schools are set up, there is a pronounced shift in reading approach between the 3rd and 4th grades. In the 4th grade, or so the convention goes, children are no longer “learning to read” but “reading to learn,” using the skills (supposedly) acquired in the preceding years to gain and process information in all the subjects they face in school, to think critically about what they are learning and to act upon and share the resulting knowledge with those around them. Being able, then, to read proficiently upon entering 4th grade becomes a make-or-break issue: three-quarters of children who are poor readers when entering 4th grade will still be poor readers in high school, according to researchers at Yale University. Being a less-than-modestly skilled reader at the end of 3rd grade makes it unlikely that a student will graduate from high school. Reading proficiency serves as not only the building blocks of a child’s education but as its very foundation. And as anyone who has built a house of blocks can attest to, it is very difficult to insert a foundation after the house is built.

So what? If your own children are proficient readers, and you do not operate a business that relies on finding skilled or trainable employees, this issue wouldn’t concern you, right? Well, consider this:

“In 2007, nearly 6.2 million young people (16% of the 16-24 age group) were high school dropouts. Every student who does not complete high school costs our society an estimated \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity. High school dropouts also are more likely than those who graduate to be arrested or have a child while still a teenager, both of which incur additional financial and social costs.”

In All Montana Schools

Montana students are showing steady improvement in reading proficiency. Since the 2003-04 school year, overall reading proficiency for all Montana schools (public and

Table 1
4th Graders Who Scored Below Proficient Reading Levels (Public School Only)

State	Percent below proficient	National Rank
Montana	65%	17
North Dakota	65%	17
South Dakota	67%	25
Washington	67%	25
Wyoming	67%	25
Idaho	68%	29
Oregon	69%	32

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Assessment of Educational Progress (2009 Reading Assessment).

Table 2
4th Graders Who Scored Below Proficiency by Socio-Economic Group

	Percent Below Proficiency
All Montana 4 th graders	65%
White 4 th graders	63%
American Indian 4 th graders	84%
Rural 4 th graders	68%
Urban 4 th graders	62%
4 th graders eligible for free/reduced-price lunch	79%
4 th graders not eligible for free/reduced-price lunch	56%
4 th graders in schools with Title I funding	73%
4 th graders in schools without Title I funding	57%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Assessment of Educational Progress (2009 Reading Assessment).

private) has gone from 62 percent to 84 percent. In fact, for the 2009-10 school year only six states scored higher in combined 4th grade reading proficiency than Montana. Additionally, proficiency rates for American Indian students in Montana are improving at rates significantly higher than the national average, though they still fall below the white student population.

In Montana Public Schools

When considering public schools only, the NAEP’s standardized proficiency scores rank Montana 17th in the nation, with 65 percent reading below proficient at the start of 4th grade. This is better than most of our neighboring states, though not by a large margin (Table 1).

Generally speaking, city-dwelling students tend to have higher non-proficient rates than those in rural areas; however, in Montana 68 percent of rural students scored below proficient reading levels, while 62 percent of city students did. There is an even sharper distinction in proficiency levels



Learning to Read vs. Reading to Learn

Learning to read is a process that continues for years. While children are currently expected to largely switch from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” around 4th grade, the learning process goes on beyond elementary school. Practice in the basic skills of identifying sight-words and decoding words needs to continue beyond 4th grade as students apply these skills to increasingly complex material. It is also important to continue to provide instruction on how to interpret and comprehend what they are reading. Contrary to the conclusion reached in the 1960s that reading comprehension cannot be taught but can only be achieved through a student’s intelligence and experience, comprehension strategies can and should be taught in grades kindergarten through 8th grade. In some kindergarten through 3rd grade classrooms, the two approaches are being taught in parallel, while in upper grades reading strategy instruction helps “students to comprehend, recall, and analyze information in fiction, nonfiction, and content textbooks.”

Source: Robb, Laura. The Myth of Learn to Read/Read to Learn. Instructor Magazine.

based on economic status, with 79 percent of children eligible for free or reduced-price lunch not being proficient readers by 4th grade, with only 56 percent of those non-eligible not being proficient at that time. Likewise, schools that receive Title I funding have more students below proficiency than schools

that do not qualify for such funding. Though reportedly improving over time, the rate of non-proficiency among American Indian 4th graders was at 84 percent during the 2009-10 school year, a rate that unfortunately is about the norm for American Indian students nationwide (Table 2, page 13).

Table 3
Montana Child and Youth Statistics

	Percent	National Rank
Children ages 3-5 not enrolled in nursery school, preschool or kindergarten	52%	46
Children ages 1-5 who are read to less than 3 days per week	8%	6
Children ages 6-17 who repeated one or more grades since starting Kindergarten	9%	20
Teens ages 16-19 who are not in school and not high school graduates	9%	44
Persons ages 18-24 not attending school, not working and with a high school diploma or less	14%	24

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007 National Survey of Children's Health.

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We owe our children a fair opportunity to graduate from high school and to be ready for what their futures bring, be it college, workforce, or simply life. But we also have obligations to Montana's and the nation's workforce, employers, colleges and universities, and armed forces: to provide a larger pool of high school graduates prepared to take up the responsibilities of citizenship and adulthood. The alternative is to sit idly by while the nation suffers enormous losses in individual potential and sees the erosion of our competitiveness, our readiness, and our ideals.

Other Montana Trends

Related statistics show that Montana ranks 46th based on the number of children ages 3 to 5 who are not enrolled in nursery school, preschool or kindergarten (only 52% are enrolled). However, an impressive 92 percent of children ages 1 to 5 are read to almost every day, giving Montana the rank of 6th best in the nation. Additionally, only 9 percent of Montana youth have repeated one or more grades since starting kindergarten. While the 9 percent of Montana teens ages 16 to 19 who are not in school and not high school graduates give the state a ranking of 44, the state ranks 24th

for the 18-to-25 age group, with 14 percent not working and being without a high school diploma or its equivalent (Table 3). □

Thale Dillon is the director of data analysis for Montana KIDS COUNT.

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