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## Community Literacy Initiative Literacy Report Part I: Third Grade Reading

Literacy Center of West Michigan

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COMMUNITY LITERACY INITIATIVE  
**LITERACY REPORT**

PART I: THIRD GRADE READING



**Literacy Center**  
of West Michigan  
Community Literacy Initiative

# Part I: Third Grade Reading

## An Important Piece of the Community Literacy Cycle



**SUSAN K. LEDY**  
President/CEO  
Literacy Center of West Michigan



**LINDSAY MCHOLME**  
Director, Community Literacy Initiative  
Literacy Center of West Michigan

### Dear Friends,

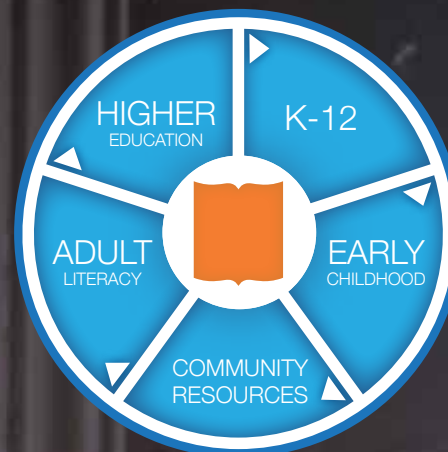
The Community Literacy Initiative (CLI) is a coalition that seeks to empower community leaders, parents, and residents to improve literacy for all ages. Facilitated by the Literacy Center of West Michigan, the current coalition extends an open invitation to any organization interested in improving the literacy landscape in our community. During the past year, the coalition served the community by organizing the Community Literacy Summit for 223 participants, facilitating Neighborhood Literacy Forum meetings, developing the online bilingual Community Literacy Directory with over 50 organizations now enrolled, and engaging the community in the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.

We are pleased to offer you this first report which focuses on the importance of children reading at grade level by the end of third grade. One of the goals of CLI is to provide the community with access to literacy data that reflects the local trends. As a coalition, we see grade level reading as one part of a more holistic approach toward improving literacy. We acknowledge that literacy is solved from a community-wide perspective that includes early readiness support, attendance support, adult and family literacy services, and community involvement. Our hope is to jump-start a community conversation around integrating these approaches through a series of literacy reports.

All the Best,

**SUSAN K. LEDY**

**LINDSAY MCHOLME**



### Cycle of Literacy

*“All parts of the circle are important: excellent schools, early childhood programs, colleges, parent literacy, and community engagement are needed. The above graphic represents this circular and generational nature of literacy development.”*

**SUSAN K. LEDY**  
President/CEO,  
Literacy Center of West Michigan

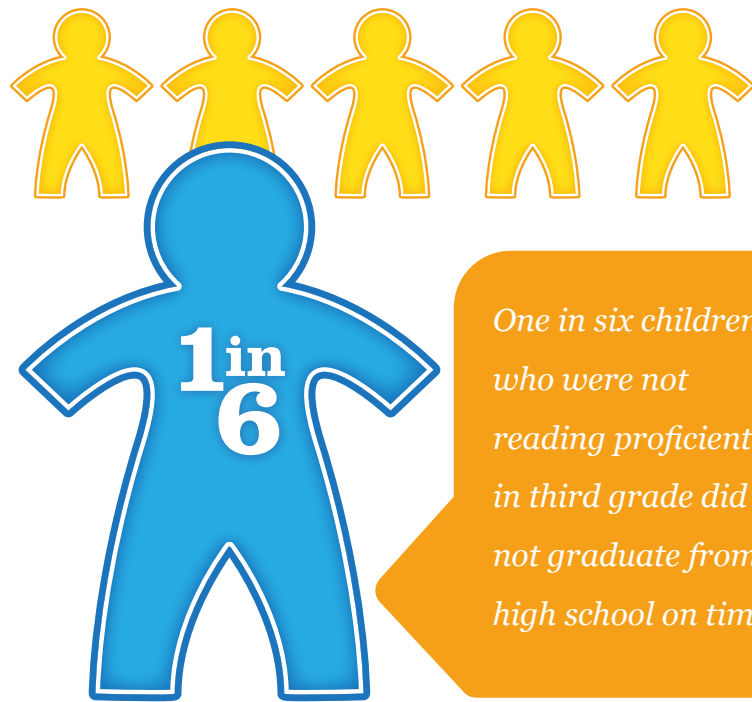


# Why is Third-Grade Reading Proficiency So Important?

Most children learn to read by the end of third grade; after that point, they read to learn. Research has shown that millions of American children get to fourth grade without having learned to read proficiently. Consequently, school curriculums become increasingly difficult for those who do not read at grade level by the end of third grade.

Often, third-graders fall behind and are at risk of:

- Remaining poor readers through high school
- Having low self-esteem and lack of motivation to learn
- Dropping out of high school
- Not attending college



*“Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said in his **I Have A Dream** speech that he hoped one day all children ‘will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.’*

*Access to the American Dream has always been through the door of education. The fact that the Community Literacy Initiative and this community have chosen to put a stake in the ground on this issue says a lot about who we are as a people in Grand Rapids and what we really believe about equality. There can be no social nor economic equality unless all children have the same opportunity to learn.”*

**TONY CAMPBELL**  
Community Literacy Initiative Advisory Council  
Co-Chair, Reformed Church in America



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DONATE  
ADVOCATE**  
*Find out how on page 15*

## Socioeconomic Implications

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79), a nationally representative study that began assessing elementary school aged children in 1979 and subsequently followed the same children into their young adult years, reveals important findings regarding the importance of grade-level reading, high school graduation, and influential factors such as poverty and race/ethnicity:

- One in six children who were not reading proficiently in third grade did not graduate from high school on time, a rate four times greater than that for proficient readers.

- For children who were poor for at least a year and were not reading proficiently in third grade, the proportion that did not finish high school was 26 percent—which was more than six times the rate for all proficient readers.
- Graduation rates for Black/African American and Hispanic students who were not proficient readers in third grade lagged far behind those for White students with the same reading skills. About a quarter of Black/African American and Hispanic students who were not reading proficiently in the third grade did not graduate from high school, compared to 13 percent of other students.



## Join Us in the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

- Early readiness ensures that children have the skills necessary for learning before they enter school. This is especially important for children who come from backgrounds that limit their exposure to language. Research shows that effective early readiness programs can ensure that children, irrespective of background, can learn the foundational cognitive and language skills needed for success in the school setting.
- Out-of-school time literacy support, including both after-school and summer learning, has also proven to be beneficial to students. Studies have shown that reading programs and tutoring outside of school have improved youth's reading skills, including vocabulary use and reading comprehension.
- Adult literacy and parental engagement with children through reading, singing, and storytelling has shown to benefit children's development in vocabulary, reading skills, and academic performance. Additionally, parents who possess a more formal education tend to be more involved with their children's schools and have children who are more likely to score higher on standardized reading tests.
- Community supports are an additional element to ensure that children are reading at grade level by third grade. Schools that integrate resources and services from the community can benefit student achievement in school, especially for early elementary school students. Supports can include a variety of efforts, such as tutoring, mentor programs, attendance support, and additional learning opportunities. One study shows that schools which use community resources to help enhance student learning (in addition to other elements) reported higher percentages of students who scored satisfactory on standardized tests measuring reading and writing.

## All Children Have the Right to Resources that will Help Them Succeed

Sixteen percent of Black/African American students and 17 percent of Hispanic students read at the proficient level, compared to 42 percent of White students, according to results from a 2009 study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

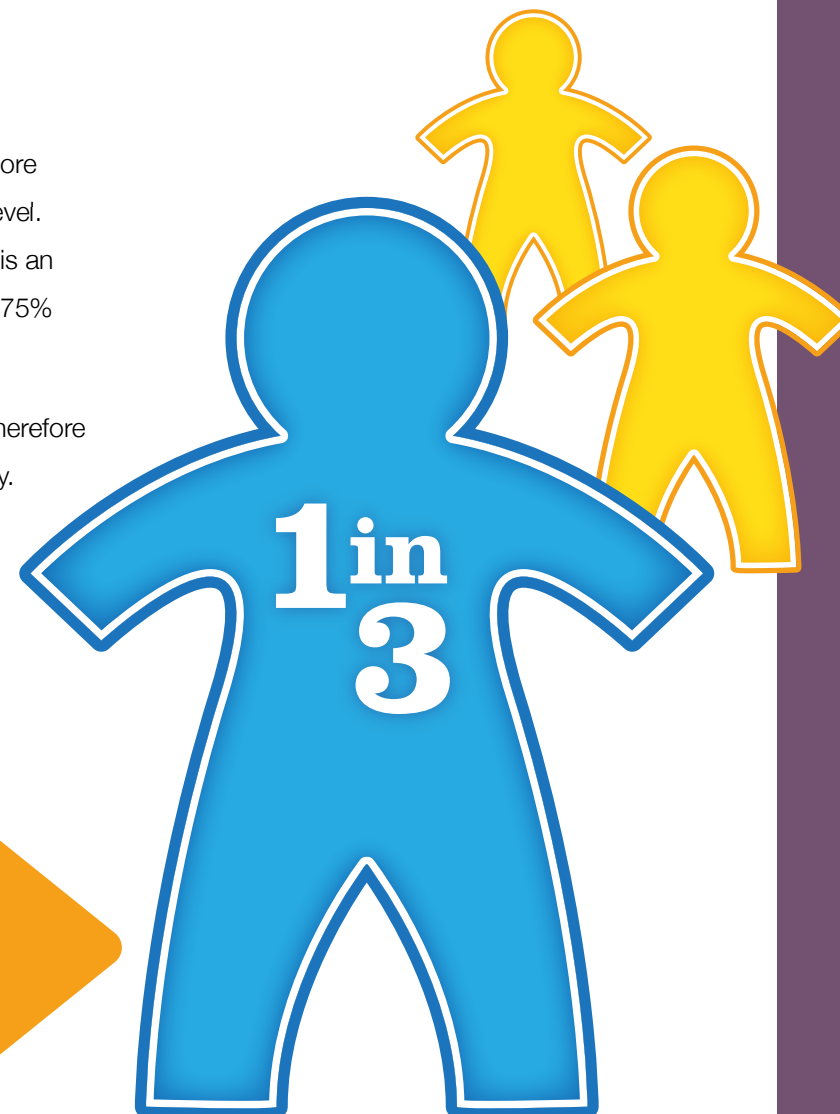
Children who live in poverty often do not have access to resources such as high quality child care or early education and are more likely to live in neighborhoods with low-performing schools. As a consequence, these children tend to develop weaker academic skills. Many are lacking the developmental skills needed for successful learning once they enter school.

On a national level, research shows that only 33 percent of fourth graders read at a proficient level. Therefore, 67 percent, or two-thirds of these students do not finish third grade with sufficient reading skills.

As these children progress to adulthood, they are more likely to be unemployed or earn below the poverty level. Additionally, the link between low literacy and crime is an important factor, as 85% of delinquent children and 75% of adult prison inmates are functionally illiterate.

Reading at grade level by the end of third grade is therefore critical to the success of children and the community. In order to promote literacy there are several supports a child may need, such as: early readiness programs, out-of-school time programs, parental engagement, and community initiatives.

*Nationally, only one in three fourth graders reads at a proficient level.*



# Literacy in West Michigan

In order to improve literacy rates in West Michigan and support the need for proficient reading levels by the end of third grade, our community must have an understanding of the current state of literacy in our region. The information below reflects literacy data for Kent County, but the goal is to eventually expand on the information gathered to the rest of West Michigan.

## Early Readiness

Early readiness is an important indicator for future reading proficiency. Many initiatives already exist to support this effort, including the Great Start Collaborative of Kent County – a group of local professionals and parents that helps ensure all children have the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in school and in life.

The Great Start Collaborative, with the Community Research Institute at Grand Valley State University (CRI), gathered data on Kent County youth's early literacy readiness with the purpose of creating county-wide indicators for school readiness.

A sample of approximately 600 kindergarten students from 20 participating school districts in Kent County were administered the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-IV) and Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening K (PALS-K) tests. The PPVT-IV measures the receptive vocabulary of children. The PALS-K measures knowledge of several important literacy fundamentals including phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and knowledge of letter sounds.

*“No single group or agency can do this alone. It will take a collective community effort to ensure every child is meeting their goals by the end of third grade.”*

**JESSE HERTSTEIN**

*Community Literacy Initiative Advisory Council  
Co-Chair, Amway*



Together, those assessments provide a snapshot of baseline readiness for children beginning kindergarten. This sampling method allows for generalization across the total kindergarten enrollment (9,404 children) in Kent County ISD schools during the 2010-2011 school year.

- Approximately one out of six students (17.1%) scored in either the extremely low (8.3%) or moderately low (8.8%) range on the PPVT-IV. Therefore, approximately 1,600 children entered kindergarten with less than age-appropriate oral language skills.
- The PALS-K test identifies children as at-risk of needing special services to progress to reading at grade level by third grade. Twenty percent of children in the sample taking the PALS-K scored in the at-risk range. Therefore, approximately 1,880 children entered kindergarten at-risk for needing special services.
- Nine percent of students fall into a category that could be described as “extreme risk” – they scored both at-risk on the PALS-K and had less than age-appropriate oral language skills on the PPVT-IV. This percentage converts to more than 800 kindergartners in Kent County.

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ADVOCATE

*Find out how on page 15*



*“We need to look at improving grade level reading so that children have the opportunity to pursue their future careers and maintain a quality life in this great city.”*

**BING GOEI**  
*Literacy Champion, Eastern Floral*



## Third Grade Reading Proficiency

Out of the 20 public school districts in the Kent ISD, three districts have a majority of students in the third grade who are only Partially Proficient or Not Proficient in reading, according to MEAP 2011-2012 scores: Grand Rapids (59%); Godfrey-Lee (54%); and Kelloggsville (51%). The Michigan Department of Education assesses reading level for the Kent Intermediate School District (Kent ISD) using the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). MEAP reading scores fall into four performance levels: Advanced, Proficient, Partially Proficient, and Not Proficient.

Eight school districts have between 25 and 50 percent of third grade students who are only Partially Proficient or Not Proficient in reading: Wyoming (43%); Kentwood (41%); Godwin Heights (39%); Comstock Park (38%); Kent City (37%); Kenowa Hills (33%); Cedar Springs (31%); and Northview (27%).

The remaining nine school districts (Byron Center, Caledonia, East Grand Rapids, Forest Hills, Grandville, Lowell, Rockford, Sparta, and Thornapple Kellogg) have fewer than 25 percent of third grade students who are Partially Proficient or Not Proficient in reading.

Overall, 34 percent of third graders – approximately 2,500 students – in Kent ISD are only Partially Proficient or Not Proficient in reading. This means that Kent ISD school districts have approximately one in three third grade students who are not reading at grade level. Given the importance of attaining reading proficiency by the end of third grade, continued focus and energy should be given to this issue.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY GRAND RAPIDS PUBLIC SCHOOLS



## A Message from Grand Rapids Public Schools Superintendent Teresa Weatherall Neal, M.Ed.

As a community, we have a civic and moral obligation to ensure each and every child achieves their academic potential. Children must learn to read in order to read to learn. Achieving and maintaining grade level literacy, attending school, and participating in after school activities are all critical elements of a child’s academic, social, and mental development.

The Community Literacy Initiative of the Literacy Center of West Michigan plays a critical role in supporting children and parents by serving as literacy advocates with the right tools, resources, information, and expertise.

**TERESA WEATHERALL NEAL, M.ED.**  
*Superintendent of Schools  
 Grand Rapids Public Schools*

## Parent Profile: Monica Zavala

### The Importance of Adult Literacy and Parent Engagement

Monica Zavala emigrated from Mexico 15 years ago, but she never became fluent in English until her oldest son Emmanuel was in third grade. By the time he was at that level, all of his homework was in English.

“I wanted to help him, but I couldn’t because of the language barrier. That’s why I decided to go back to school,” she said.

Since then, Monica has taken English literacy classes at her children’s school, Cesar E. Chavez Elementary, through the Literacy Center of West Michigan’s Schools of Hope Family Literacy Program. She is also currently enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at Grand Rapids Community College.

Her children, ages 2, 6, and 10, are all bilingual in Spanish and English, and enjoy reading and learning in school.

“They [My children] are doing something that is not easy [by going to school]. I understand this because I am taking English classes.”



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ADVOCATE

Find out how on page 15



*“We can help our children  
be ready to learn...*

*I don’t worry for my  
children. I worry for  
all children because they  
are the future.”*

**MONICA ZAVALA**  
Parent Leader

Monica never gives up on improving her own literacy or her children’s education. As a Parent Action Leader (PALS) parent at Cesar E. Chavez Elementary, sometimes the other parents will ask Monica how she has time to be so involved.

She responds to this question the same way every time she is asked: “Sometimes I think I’m too tired, but when I see my kids, I think, ‘that’s my life. I do this because I love them.’”

It is stories like this that underscore the need for effective literacy programs in our community. Literacy plays such an important role in this parent’s life, as it does for so many other families. In order to best serve families, our community needs to join together to develop a way to continually assess literacy needs and discover what is really working to improve people’s lives.





PHOTO PROVIDED BY CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS

**VOLUNTEER**  
*as a literacy tutor*

**DONATE**  
*to an organization that provides literacy instruction*

**ADVOCATE**  
*for improving literacy in our community*

## The Community Literacy Initiative - A Collaborative Bringing it All Together

The Community Literacy Initiative (CLI) is a coalition facilitated by the Literacy Center of West Michigan that seeks to empower community leaders, parents, and residents to improve literacy for all ages in West Michigan. CLI is working to develop a common literacy measurement system for our community in order to collect data and report on the links between the following topics:

- Third grade reading benchmarks
- Early readiness
- Adult literacy and parent involvement
- Out-of-school time literacy programs and community coordination around literacy

CLI will continue to develop a system to measure, track, and monitor literacy data in West Michigan. As a collaborative, CLI wants to establish a common agenda in the community on how best to address and measure literacy outcomes. The intention is to provide accurate and comprehensive information to the region on a continual basis. With this information, the community can track changes in these key areas of literacy and work together to have a collective impact across all sectors of the community.

### A Call to Action from Literacy Champion Mayor George Heartwell

Citizens of West Michigan, I put the question before you: What kind of community do you want? Are you satisfied with the one we have, where children continue to live in poverty? Where hunger still haunts too many homes? Where unemployment has become the way of life for many discouraged adults and yet companies still struggle to find workers who meet the basic educational requirements for entry-level jobs? Or do you want a community where college graduates are eager to live; where opportunity is everywhere and poverty is declining? Do you want a city of innovators, educators, and entrepreneurs? A community of promise and hope?

There is one thing we can do that will make all the difference in the world. If we ensure that all children read at grade-level by [the end of] third grade, despair will turn to hope – overnight – in the lives of families and in the life of the community. The importance of literacy to the success of the community should not be underestimated.

Join me in the efforts of the Community Literacy Initiative and let's get our community on track for success.

**GEORGE K. HEARTWELL**  
*Community Literacy Initiative  
Literacy Champion*



## Your Help is Critical

A child who does not read at grade level by the end of third grade is less likely to graduate from high school and ultimately less likely to obtain a decent paying job and pass on valuable literacy skills to his/her future children.

Your help is critical! Our community's future depends on our collaborative effort to make a difference. To find out how you can make a difference by volunteering, donating, or advocating, contact the Community Literacy Initiative at (616) 459-5151 x45 or [lmcholme@literacycenterwm.org](mailto:lmcholme@literacycenterwm.org).



# Community Literacy Initiative Advisory Council

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Bing Goei, Eastern Floral

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References to this report can be found at:  
[literacycenterwm.org/community-literacy-report](http://literacycenterwm.org/community-literacy-report)