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It's Time to Declare War on the Reading Crisis in the State of Michigan

by Gwendolyn Thompson McMillon

Reading scores in Michigan indicate that we have surpassed crisis level – we have now reached utter pandemonium. Struggling readers outweigh proficient readers in Michigan schools. We have been in a crisis situation for quite some time, but unfortunately the education of our children has not been Michigan's number one priority. Is it possible that Michigan citizens have become desensitized to negative news and unintentionally minimized the importance of our reading crisis? Our state continues to suffer from a long-term economic downturn, increased violence in several cities, political struggles, and other societal ills; discussions about these important topics seem to overshadow the dismal scores in reading. The devastation that will occur if we do nothing to ensure a literate citizenry is immeasurable. With all of the technological advancements around us, how can we be at risk of increased illiteracy? Where have we gone wrong? What can be done to improve reading scores for Michigan students – especially minority students who are drastically behind their counterparts in other states?

The purpose of this editorial is to examine specific reading scores in the State of Michigan, discuss implications of the scores for Michigan citizenry, and suggest possible ways to improve reading scores for Michigan children.

Michigan Reading Scores: Do We Have a Problem?

In the *Michigan Summary: Reading by the End of the Third Grade Matters Kids Count Special Report* from the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010), Michigan ranked 34th among 50 states for 4th graders who read at proficient level or above in 2009. Not surprisingly, poverty played an important factor in some of the scores. In 2009, United States thresholds of poverty were \$21,832 for a family of four and \$25,211 for a family of five according to the United States Census Bureau (www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/thresh09.html). More



specifically, in Michigan, there were 519,828 children living in poverty in 2009, and the number increased to 538,649 in 2010 (www.census.gov/prd/2011pubs/acsbr10-05.pdf). In 2009, 85% of low income students in Michigan ranked below proficient levels; however, 60% of high income students also ranked below proficient levels. Poverty is not a factor when considering the scores of these high income students. What could be the reason for such low scores for students at all income levels in Michigan? While these rates are alarming, when the data is analyzed by race, the achievement gap broadens much more. In 2009, below proficient levels for Michigan 4th grade students by race were: Whites 64%, African American 91%, Asian and Pacific Islander 58%, Hispanic or Latino 83%. These scores are reported every two years, and I was hopeful that the 2011 scores would show a marked increase; however, much to my dismay, disaggregated by race, Michigan 4th graders who scored below proficiency level in 2011 were: Whites 63%, African American 92%, Asian and Pacific Islander 52%, Hispanic or Latino 80%. These numbers are unacceptable and indicative of the quality of life that the majority of Michigan citizens will experience in the future. In an online commentary (<http://gradelevelreading.net/about-us/from-the-managing-director>), Ralph Smith, Managing Editor for the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading project asserts:

An alarming number of children—about 67 percent nationwide and more than 80 percent of those from low-income families—are not proficient readers by the end of third grade. This has significant and long-term consequences not only for each of those children but for their communities, and for our nation as a whole. If left unchecked, this problem will undermine efforts to end intergenerational poverty, close the achievement gap, and reduce high school dropout rates. Far fewer of the next generation will be prepared to succeed in a global economy, participate in higher education, or enter military and civilian service. (2013)

The future of our state and nation is at stake. It's time to declare war on the reading crisis in the State of Michigan!

As a literacy researcher and teacher educator, I am appalled to see such drastically low reading scores for our Michigan students. Although we are ranked 34th out of 50 states for all 4th grade students, scores for African American students in Michigan are the lowest scores in the entire United States! This is absolutely unacceptable. According to the United States Department of Education (1999), 75% of readers who are poor readers in third grade will remain poor readers in high school. In other words, in six years when the students from the 2011 reading scores are in high school, a projected 47.25% Whites, 69% African Americans, 39% Asian and Pacific Islanders, and 60% Hispanic or Latinos will still be poor readers with limited potential to finish high school. Students who do not read at grade level by third grade are four times more likely to leave high school without a diploma than students who are proficient readers (2011). Further, students who are poor readers and live in poverty are six times more likely to drop out than their counterparts. These statistics should provide the impetus for Michigan educators to launch a serious campaign on illiteracy.

The ability or inability to read impacts students' scores in all areas. The State of Michigan reported 64% of 3rd graders and 60% of 4th and 5th graders were below proficiency in mathematics. Science is tested in grades 5 and 8, and 85% of Michigan's 5th graders were below proficiency in 2011, along with 83% of Michigan's 8th graders. Social studies, tested in grades 6 and 9 were: 6th grade - 72% below proficiency and 9th grade - 71% below proficiency.

As Michigan educators, we must pool our resources to address the needs of our students. Intervention needs to occur across the curriculum - in and outside of school classrooms. Our state statistics show that students of color and students living in poverty are exceptionally vulnerable, and all of our children need extensive, intensive intervention if we want to prevent the cycle of poverty and improve the quality of life for Michigan citizens. It is time to declare war on the reading crisis in the State of Michigan!

Implications

There are numerous negative implications that could result from the dismal scores discussed above. With such low elementary and middle school scores, high school and college graduation rates are destined to decrease. Students with limited reading skills are less likely to attend college and/or pursue a career that requires post high school training. Low graduation rates reduce the pool of qualified students for college admission. Michigan junior colleges as well as 4-year colleges and universities will eventually suffer lower enrollment if Michigan students are ill-prepared to matriculate successfully in their programs.

Michigan corporations and organizations will also eventually suffer if low reading scores persist. The most precious commodity of our state - human capital, will not be capable of filling the necessary positions. They will not be able to compete for positions that require college degrees and/or special training beyond high school. In order to improve their quality of life, students

who live in poverty must be able to break barriers that prevented their ancestors from becoming successful.

High unemployment, juvenile delinquency and an increased prison population are also related to low reading scores. With limited training and education, one's life options decrease, which often impact individuals in various ways – depression, homelessness, addictions, poor health care, and hunger may ultimately lead to criminal activity. All of these societal ills work to perpetuate cycles of poverty for families and disintegrate the State of Michigan by destroying our citizens one-by-one. How can we stop this potential devastation?

What can teachers and other concerned advocates do to improve the education of students in Michigan? Many teachers and concerned advocates are ill-equipped to address the problems that students and their families experience as a result of poverty and cultural and racial differences. They need the assistance of researchers and other professionals who have the ability to address these issues. It's time to declare war on the reading crisis in the State of Michigan!

Moving from Rhetoric to Action in Our Schools and Communities

I believe the children are our future.
Teach them well and let them lead the way.
Show them all the beauty they possess inside.
Give them a sense of pride to make it easier.
Let the children's laughter remind us how we
used to be.

(Lyrics to Whitney Houston's (1986) *The Greatest Love of All*, Masser & Creed, 1977)

If Michigan children are the future of the State of Michigan, we must work purposefully and strategically to improve reading scores, and thereby improve the potential of our state. Although stu-

dents of color and students living in poverty are the most at risk, a close examination of statistics and qualitative reports discussed above indicate that *all* students are performing poorly in many categories. We cannot afford to continue with a "business as usual" mentality concerning the education of our children in Michigan. A concerted effort must be implemented to save our children and to ensure that our state becomes a more inviting place to live and raise a family.

There are numerous approaches that one could take to address reading improvement across the State of Michigan, however due to time and space constraints, I will begin our dialogue by briefly discussing two specific recommendations: training and implementation.

First of all, teachers and other educators, parents, guardians and community advocates are struggling in their capacities. Teachers are overwhelmed with their numerous responsibilities. Curricular changes, standardized testing, issues of accountability, and public criticism of test scores are only a few of teachers' concerns. While their students are struggling because of financial problems at home, they face lay-offs, transfers, school closings, and uncertainty of the future of their own families and children. It is difficult to teach under such stressful conditions, but they find a way to go to work and attempt to develop ways to reach and teach our Michigan students. The fact is that the demographics of our student population have changed tremendously over the last several decades and our teachers have not been prepared to teach the students who are in their classrooms today. Second language learners and minority students often out-number White students in Michigan classrooms, but the majority of the teaching population is still White, middle-class females. The race and social class of teachers do not determine their ability to teach all types of students, however, when students and teachers have significantly different values and beliefs, there is an increased possibility that classroom cultural dissonance will occur (Edwards, McMillon & Turner, 2010). Teacher education pro-

grams and professional development training could address these issues, but often they offer insufficient training in the area of cultural competence. Many teacher education programs offer one course that address issues of culture, race and other differences, and the other courses fail to incorporate the significant impact that culture, race, language, socio-economic status and other similar issues have on teaching and learning. Teacher education programs and professional development workshops that fail to acknowledge and address these issues are indirectly perpetuating the cycle of illiteracy in the State of Michigan. Although unintentional, the result of failing to adequately prepare our teachers to teach their diverse student population is contributing to the downward spiral of our students' educational future (Lazar, Edwards & McMillon, 2012).

Parents expect teachers to have answers. They expect teachers who have earned degrees and spent years matriculating at universities to be able to solve their children's educational problems. They think teachers can teach their children how to read, even if they struggle. When their expectations are not met, parents may lose hope, become ambivalent, and begin to criticize teachers (McMillon & Edwards, 2000). Teachers think that parents are supposed to prepare their children before they begin school because perhaps their mother read to them and took them to the library. Unfortunately, some parents do not prepare their children before they begin school. Some parents may not know how to prepare their children, while others simply did not have time because of their work schedule. Sadly, some parents cannot teach their children because they are illiterate or have very limited skills. Regardless of the reason, many children begin school without the level of exposure to print, language, numbers and basic skills that they need to meet expectations by third grade. Teachers have to scramble and use innovative methods to try to close the learning gap between their students who are not prepared when they enter school and the students who are prepared. Some teachers become frus-

trated and blame parents for the struggle that they experience with some unprepared students. It's a vicious "blaming game." Parents blame teachers and teachers blame parents, but it is the students who lose the most. Everyone must be trained to understand their role and responsibilities. Teachers and parents must work together as a team to prepare students for a prosperous future. In cases where parents are uninvolved, community advocates – pastors, neighbors, grandparents, coaches, mentors and other role models – are needed. Students need their "village" to become involved in improving their educational trajectories.

The second part of the recommendations is "implementation." When teachers and other educators, parents and community advocates receive training concerning how to teach Michigan students, they need support to implement their ideas. Unfortunately, many teacher education programs and professional development workshops offer ideas but do not have a system that offers follow-up for participants. Implementation of ideas requires administrative and financial support from schools and school districts. At a time when finances are limited, it may seem impossible to financially support new ideas, however, many innovative ideas require minimal funding. Instead changes in the mindset of teachers, administrators, board members, parents and community advocates is often the first and most important step in moving towards improvement. When a team becomes unified behind a shared vision, strategies can be developed to fit any size budget. Moving from training to implementation requires "action". It is time to deploy our troops. It's time to declare war on the reading crisis in the State of Michigan.

What can *you* do to help?

This discussion has only begun to touch the surface of a deeply rooted problem. I invite collaborators – concerned advocates – to participate in the fight against illiteracy in the State of Michi-

gan. Please email me at mcmillon@oakland.edu with your ideas, comments, suggestions and recommendations. I will organize them and write a follow-up article for Michigan Reading Journal readers. Share your “pockets of hope” – ideas that have worked in your classroom, at your school, in your university courses that can improve the reading scores of our Michigan students. Please join me. It’s time to declare war on the reading crisis in the State of Michigan!

Gwendolyn Thompson McMillon is an associate professor of literacy in the Department of Reading & Language Arts at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. Dr. McMillon’s research focuses on identifying effective ways to negotiate the cultural borders between various learning environments, and improving literacy teaching and learning in and out of school. She examines literacy experiences in classrooms, homes and other learning environments (e.g. church, work and within organizations) for the purpose of developing connections within and across environments.

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