

Reading Success Matters in Colorado

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Key economic indicators continue to show our country has not fully recovered from the ongoing recession. Many financial challenges have stymied dynamic growth: weak home sales, the high price of oil, and low consumer confidence, to name just a few. But nothing has slowed recovery more, both in Colorado and in the nation, than a large, undereducated workforce. Too many highly skilled jobs are going unfilled while hundreds of thousands of hardworking but undereducated people remain unemployed. We need to do more to provide a high-quality education to Colorado's entire workforce and to ensure that education starts in preschool and continues through college graduation.

Colorado's Educational Challenge

Viewed without the benefit of context, Colorado seems to be doing well. Compared to most other states, the state's high school graduation rates and college degree attainment rates are above average. Yet state data show that only three in every four Colorado students graduate high school, in some neighborhoods, the numbers are significantly lower. Colorado's educational and workforce challenges are compounded by the fact that the number of students failing to graduate from high school significantly limits the number of students pursuing a college degree and receiving the credentials they need to be successful in today's job market. That reality is particularly stark among students who are low income or ethnic or racial minorities. If we can help change the experience of those students, we can directly impact the quality of Colorado's workforce and our state's long-term economic vitality and competitiveness.

The bad news is that too many of Colorado's young people have not found success in the state's educational system; the good news is that we know who they are and what we can do to help improve their chances for educational and career success. For most of these students, we can trace their learning challenges back to their elementary school years. Using

longitudinal data collected on Colorado students, we can look back at individual student performance in each grade level and recognize that most of these students were struggling readers in third grade. In 2010, statewide reading assessments found that 29 percent of Colorado third graders ranked at unsatisfactory or partially proficient levels. This is about the same number of students who will fail to graduate. Not only is it the same number; it is the same *students*. When children are successful readers at an early age, they are more likely to be successful high school and college students.

The fact that early childhood literacy is a key indicator of future academic achievement, high school graduation, and college enrollment is amply supported by data. Ultimately, the state's ability to produce a skilled and competitive workforce for a thriving state economy is also tied to that indicator. Reading success matters to this state's future, and we all need to combine our efforts, our imagination, and our commitment to a shared vision to ensure that every student becomes a successful reader.

Vision for Early Childhood Literacy

Colorado's education reform agenda is grounded in a commitment to a seamless education pipeline that addresses the developmental needs for all children from birth to high school graduation and then on to college or a meaningful career. We know the path to early childhood literacy success starts at birth; as long ago as 1979, Joseph D. Perry and colleagues found that a child's vocabulary at age three and school readiness at kindergarten are among the most important predictors of reading ability by third grade. Unfortunately, it is clear that there is a significant variation among Colorado's children in terms of their vocabulary at age three and the degree to which they are ready for school and that that variation carries over into their early school years.

Statewide reading assessments begin in Colorado at the end of third grade. It is this pivotal benchmark

in reading development that points to future learning success. Up to third grade, students are learning to read; after third grade, students are reading to learn. If they have not mastered reading, they will not master the academic subjects that follow for obvious reasons: They simply lack the reading skills and comprehension necessary to learn independently. Third-grade reading is a critical launch point for academic achievement and success.

Our goal is to help ensure that all Colorado children are reading at grade level or beyond by the end of third grade. It is a goal that is easy to state but difficult to achieve without heightened public awareness and a statewide commitment to address the problem. The effective implementation of an integrated early literacy initiative will allow Colorado to lead the nation not just in early childhood literacy success but in graduation rates and postsecondary success. It is a battle worth waging.

Consistent with Governor John Hickenlooper's belief that problems can be best solved when key stakeholders with different, and sometimes conflicting, ideas are brought together, Colorado's literacy action plan includes input from a broad coalition of educators and early childhood experts and advocates. Over the course of many months, this collaborative effort produced a plan that relies on a significant public process for building deeper understanding of the value of early literacy success while creating compelling opportunities for increased community involvement. This collaboration across business, nonprofit, education, and community organizations is essential to engaging groups and individuals at the local level across Colorado.

Colorado's early childhood literacy initiative is divided into three strands—community conversations, civic engagement, and policy action—which address outreach for building public awareness and support, engaging communities in volunteer opportunities, and developing recommendations for policy reforms.

Central to the literacy initiative is the belief that state leaders and community partners must begin at a grassroots level with conversations about early literacy in neighborhoods across the state. This outreach

will develop public awareness, promote buy-in, and build an understanding of the current successes in early childhood literacy within the state and across the nation as well as of the challenges facing schools, families, and children. Additionally, these meetings will highlight the critical importance that community engagement and involvement bring to early learning for children.

The Mile High United Way and Serve Colorado—Governor's Commission on Community Service are



teaming up to build an infrastructure to mobilize volunteers, donors, businesses, and community members through evidence-based programs to make a strong impact throughout the state in grade-level reading benchmarks. For lasting change, their call to action invites Coloradans to partner with key stakeholders and craft sustainable solutions specific to the needs in their local communities. Furthermore, Mile High United Way will increase capacity, technical assistance, evaluation, and dissemination of information through its network to help increase access to high-quality programs.

The Mile High United Way was the first United Way in the country, founded in 1887 by a group of community leaders who had a vision for creating opportunities for all who lived in Colorado. It speaks to who we are as Coloradans, coming together as volunteers, business leaders, teachers, parents, families, and policy makers around a common goal: that all of Colorado's children will read at grade level by the end of third grade. Mile High United Way has always served as a catalyst for social change, and, by leveraging the extensive volunteer network of Serve Colorado, we will engage all Coloradans in this initiative.

Ultimately, the community conversations and calls for civic engagement will inform a comprehensive and robust policy action plan. Policy development is already under way as internal policy experts are evaluating research, scouring the country for best practices in classroom instruction, and reviewing effective public policy. The policy agenda will be refined in the fall of 2011 through further input by state and national experts as well as local feedback gathered from the fall community conversation process. A final three-year policy plan, the *Governor's Policy Agenda for Early Literacy Success*, with a detailed timeline, goals, objectives, and outcomes was to be released late in 2011.

Our efforts will build on the innovative policies of the last administration, supplemented by new ideas from policy experts and educators now working with us. We know that the professional expertise of highly qualified teachers and effective classroom instruction will be needed if we are to reach our ambitious goal. Colorado's recent Educator Effectiveness law, Senate Bill 10-191, will assist us in our efforts

to improve instruction for all children by identifying and rewarding high-performing teachers and providing professional development opportunities for those who can benefit from it. Effective teachers matter, and they can be most effective when they are supported by the efforts of parents and community members who are actively engaged in early literacy efforts. For that reason, our civic engagement efforts will start by working with parents of school-age children to create family-school-community partnerships that increase family engagement in school and in children's education to support the efforts of effective educators.

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Key to our success will be our approach to inspire and empower parents to help their children read and learn. This includes expanding our view of literacy to developmental milestones. In partnership with schools and the medical community, we will develop a system that includes literacy as part of the developmental assessment of young children during their visits with doctors. To do this, we will have to work with members of the medical community to leverage their role as trusted advisors to parents in the early years and to create efficient and effective literacy strategies for use by physicians during visits with parents and children. For example, measurable success has been noted in using literacy in developmental screening and assessment on the part of the medical community.

At the heart of this civic engagement work is the need to provide support to students struggling with reading in the primary grades. Our goal is to attract, screen, train, retain, and increase the number of high-quality volunteer mentors and tutors using evidence-based practices to support struggling readers in concert with parents, classroom teachers, school curriculum, and school leadership to ensure that children receive early intervention. In collaboration with schools and classroom teachers, we will recruit and provide evidence-based training for

volunteer tutors and mentors to work with students who require additional one-on-one reading assistance. We will also partner with community-based organizations and the Corporation for National and Community Service to provide research-based tutoring interventions to students struggling with reading.

It is clear that we must capitalize on learning opportunities beyond the restricted hours of the current school day and the traditional school year. We will support the work of communities to improve the availability, accessibility, and quality of reading programs offered outside of regular school hours and in the summer so that they include strong, research-based language and literacy components that are aligned with school curricula. This approach might involve developing and creating collaborative complementary reading programs (outside of regular school hours) that intentionally and seamlessly connect reading help to school curriculum. Communities may choose to go even further, perhaps by creating funding incentives for community reading programs that use best practices and research, have strong student outcomes, and work with the schools and build on existing school curricula.

Finally, our greatest challenge is to help schools to ensure that students are fully engaged in learning. Doing this means working collaboratively with schools to strengthen and use early warning systems to:

- Assess reading levels of all pupils in the early grades
- Identify chronically absent students and students struggling with reading
- Ensure the availability of research-based reading curricula
- Provide professional development for teachers and principals in the area of early literacy

It is time for Colorado and all who reside within its borders to advocate for early, research-based reading assessments for all students, the use of research-based curricula, and ongoing professional development for teachers that focuses on reading instruction and intervention.

Mile High United Way will issue calls to action that align with this early literacy initiative. Its track

record of creating high-opportunity roles for volunteers that lead to high-impact results in communities will support our efforts to address early literacy. Its key recruiting theme is simple, direct, and effective: Volunteer, Give, and Advocate.

Conclusion

Colorado's future is dependent on the state's ability to develop a globally competitive workforce, which is, in turn, dependent on the state's ability to successfully educate all of its residents. That will not happen if Colorado continues to lose thousands of young people every year when they leave school without a diploma and without the skills needed to move to college or a career. We know that the students who leave school early are the same ones who left third grade reading below grade level. If we know how to identify those students who are likely to fail, we are also able to develop and implement ways for them to succeed.

With the help of local communities, the work outlined in Colorado's literacy action plan and the successful implementation of the literacy plans of the partnering agencies can produce a systemic change in how Coloradans approach early literacy success. The Lieutenant Governor's Office will empower providers serving children and work with them toward a shared vision of early literacy proficiency and a standardized set of outcomes for birth through the third grade. This effort will be built on a foundation of public input and community conversations. From this dialogue, the partners will recruit and train volunteers and complete planning efforts to address all community supports for reading. With the energy and enthusiasm of local communities throughout the state, the work to replicate and expand evidence-based programs for early childhood literacy and the development of significant policy recommendations can be accomplished.

We need every voice in Colorado to join our efforts to ensure that all third-grade students are reading at grade level and moving successfully through a rigorous public education system. As more students do so successfully, more and better candidates for college and careers will strengthen Colorado, and it will all be tied to improvements to early literacy. We owe it to our youth, and we need it for our future.

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