

Report: More Than Half of FL Fourth-Graders Aren't Reading at Grade Level

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. - Six out of 10 fourth-graders in Florida aren't reading at grade level, according to [a new report on early reading proficiency from the Annie E. Casey Foundation](#).

The state is doing slightly better than the national average, and the report credited Florida's voluntary

pre-kindergarten program offered to all 4-year-olds.

Susan Weitzel, director of Florida Kids Count, said the state's continued success relies heavily on community involvement to offset some parents' inability to help support reading skills.

"Some of it is due to time; some of it is due to inability to read themselves," Weitzel said. "The more the community can get involved in making reading exciting, the more success I think we'll see in that arena."

Family income level also makes a difference. Researchers found that 73 percent of low-income children in Florida lacked reading proficiency by fourth grade, compared with 42 percent of children from higher-income families.

The Casey Foundation also found large disparities between racial backgrounds, with 83 percent of black children not reading at grade level, compared with 55 percent of their white counterparts. Elizabeth Burke Bryant, senior consultant for the Casey Foundation's Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, said the disparities impact children in their academic life - and beyond.

"Up until third grade, they're learning to read," she said. "After third grade, it's expected that they know how to read in order to absorb the material."

In addition to its pre-K program, Weitzel said, Florida has a number of programs that enlist members of the community to help students learn to read better - and volunteers always are needed.

"The communities can get much more involved to make reading a success, and to help them reach that kind of proficiency," she said. "There are programs that the adults in our communities can get involved with."

ReadingPals is one such program, organizing volunteers who dedicate one hour a week to read in individual or small group settings at schools. According to ReadingPals research, children who are not reading at grade level by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.

The Casey report is online at aecf.org. Information about ReadingPals is at childrensmovementflorida.org.

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