

*Summary of Research and Strategies*

than children from higher income families. For example, they have: higher rates of developmental delays and disabilities related to learning, which affect their school readiness; higher rates of asthma that affect their school attendance; and fewer opportunities for high-quality nutrition, especially during the summer. Since poor nutrition affects learning, such missed opportunities can contribute to summer learning loss.

**Student Mobility**

Students who change schools frequently, especially those in early grades, are more likely to lag behind reading than their stable peers. High levels of student mobility undermine educational outcomes not only for individual students but also for the schools they attend. Many families move frequently due to job loss or job relocation. Students who have changed schools two or more times in the previous year are half as likely as their stable peers to read well, and third graders who changed schools frequently are 2.5 times more likely to repeat a grade. Providing stable student transportation options and working with the schools in a cross-sector fashion can help address the issue of student mobility.

**Conclusion**

To read proficiently by the end of third grade has significant and long-term consequences not only for the children but also for the community they live in and the 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. Problems such as poverty, parent’s educational levels and access to quality care are common barriers facing all struggling readers.

The critical and time-sensitive nature of this issue warranted United Way of Central Iowa and its partners to focus on key community strategies that both influence the macro problems and specific community issues. They will be specifically raising community awareness through an initiative called Read to Succeed, starting 2016, on key issues of: (1) school readiness; (2) quality out-of-school time; (3) summer learning loss; and (4) parent/caregiver engagement.

# Why reading by third grade matters

*Research Executive Summary*

By 2020, United Way of Central Iowa will increase the number of third grade students who read proficiently to 90 percent.

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# Summary of research and strategies

## Reading proficiently by end of third grade

is the most important predictor of high school graduation and career success. Yet, nationwide, every year 67% of all children and more than 80% of low-income children do not read proficiently by the end of third grade. In Iowa, approximately 7,500 students fall behind in third grade reading each year. According to one national study, students who are behind in reading by the end of third grade are four times more likely to not graduate from high school thus setting them up for a life filled with economic and social challenges.

Leila Feister, the lead researcher for Annie E. Casey Foundation, writes “up until the end of 3rd grade, most students are learning to read. Beginning in fourth grade, however, they are reading to learn, using their skills to gain more information in subjects such as math and science, to solve problems, to think critically about what they are learning, and to act upon and share that knowledge in the world around them.” Certain key factors were identified, based on research, impacting third grade reading. They are: (1) school readiness; (2) chronic absence; (3) quality out-of-school time; (4) summer learning loss; (5) parent/caregiver engagement; (6) healthy readers; and (7) student mobility.

## School Readiness

Just as there is an achievement gap in school performance, there is a school readiness gap that separates

disadvantaged children from their more affluent peers. As early as 18 months, low-income children begin to fall behind in vocabulary development and other skills critical for school success. Parents play an enormous role in closing this gap, as do daycare providers, pediatricians, preschool programs, and the broader community. Research shows that learning begins long before a child enters kindergarten. Children, even infants, soak up words, rhymes, songs, and images. Vocabulary development is particularly important. A child’s health, and the timely recognition of developmental delays, is another critical aspect of school readiness. Doctors, care-providers, and preschool teachers play a key role.

Some key statistics about school readiness are: 61% of low-income children have no children’s books at home; children from impoverished backgrounds hear as many as 30 million fewer words than their more affluent peers; by age 2, poor children are already behind their peers in listening, counting, and other skills essential to literacy; a child’s vocabulary as early as age 3 can predict third grade reading achievement; by age 5, a typical middle-class child recognizes 22 letters of the alphabet, compared to 9 for a child from a low-income family.

## Chronic Absence

Chronic absence is defined as students missing 10% or more of the school year due to excused or unexcused absences or suspensions. Research shows that 1 in 10 kindergarten students miss nearly a month of school every year. In some districts, it runs as high as 1 in 3. Kindergarteners who miss 10% of school days have

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lower academic performance when they reach first grade. Reading scores for Latino children were most seriously affected. Tracking chronic absence is a data-driven solution that can be built into federal grant applications and can be an integral part of parent engagement programs. It can be a goal for a funder’s investment—or a measure of a grantee’s success. School level messaging, community wide awareness campaign, incentives, and cross-sector coordination are some key strategies that can be implemented to reverse this pernicious problem.

## Quality Out-of-school Time

Out-of-school time programs initially originated as a space for students to have safe and supervised environments during the out-of-school hours. Today, this concept has evolved to include activities such as academic enrichment, skill building, positive character building, social-emotional, soft skills, etc. According to Deborah Vandell - founding dean of the School of Education at the University of California, Irvine – quality out-of-school experience is the “real solution linked to closing the (achievement) gap.” This is a significant statement especially considering how many students live in households where both parents are in the workforce. Iowa is one of the top three states in the nation where all parents are working. According to a report released by the Afterschool Alliance in 2015, in Iowa, there are approximately 114,865 (23%) children alone and unsupervised during the out-of-school hours. High quality out-of-school care includes the following: (1) quality interaction with adults, peers; (2) academic enrichment activities; (3) sustained participation in quality care over long periods of time; and (4) intensity of hours spent, typically more than 15 hours a week.

## Summer Learning Loss

Three month summer vacation breaks the rhythm of learning. This leads to forgetting key subject matter. This is true especially for children from low-income households since they have limited access to high quality reading material. Harris Cooper and his fellow researchers reviewed 39 national studies of summer academic loss and conducted an analysis using 13 of the studies. They concluded that on average, summer vacations created a [reading] gap of about 3 months between middle- and lower-class students. Cumulatively, by the end of fifth grade, disadvantaged children are nearly three grade equivalents behind their more affluent peers in reading. Summer reading programs, access to books, and cross-sector coordination can limit the summer learning slide.

## Parent and Caregiver Engagement

Parents are the first and most important teachers in their children’s lives. Research shows that students are most successful academically and socially when their parents are involved and engaged in their learning. There is no set of policies that will replace the parents’ role in their children’s education. Increasing both the quantity and quality of conversations between young children and their parents is a key strategy to boost brain development, early learning, school readiness and ultimately the number of children reading proficiently by the end of third grade.

Research shows that words used, duration of conversation and speech patterns of the child up to age 3 is derived from parents. Parents reading aloud for 30 minutes per day to their children from infancy establishes a strong foundation for future learning. However, parents from low-income families who face multiple social, emotional and economic barriers struggle to provide age-appropriate parenting to their children thus resulting in developmental delays in the child. The message is clear: parents need to talk, read and interact with their children. But what parents really need to know is how they interact make all the difference in the development of their children’s vocabulary, comprehension and critical thinking skills. Parenting classes, access to quality subsidized preschool, and cross-sector coordination can help prevent the word gap especially in low-income children.

## Healthy Readers

Healthy development greatly impacts children’s ability to learn. Children who are on track in their physical, social and emotional, cognitive, and verbal development are more successful learners from their earliest years, and they are more likely to become proficient readers. The Healthy Readers Initiative of the National Campaign for Grade-Level Reading focuses on strategies to ensure that children from low-income families are in good health and developing on track at four key milestones in their development from birth through third grade: Born Healthy, Thriving at Three, Ready at Five, and Present and Engaged in the Early Grades. At every age and stage of development, children from low-income families often receive less, and lower-quality, health care and services. As a result, they experience poor health at higher rates