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A collaborative project of
**MICHIGAN LEAGUE FOR
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KIDS COUNT report: Young students need help Michigan ranks below average for reading skills

Michigan has a long way to go to make sure children have the reading skills they need by the end of third grade, a report released today from the national KIDS COUNT project concludes.

The state ranks behind 33 other states when it comes to reading proficiency among its fourth-graders, with only three out of every 10 students considered proficient on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, according to the report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*. Michigan, Louisiana and Wisconsin were last in the country for scores of African American fourth-graders.

"The report reinforces the urgency in Michigan of stepping up efforts that allow more kids to be proficient in reading by the end of third grade, and to close the large gaps by race and income," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, director of the Kids Count in Michigan project and a senior research associate at the Michigan League for Human Services.

"Research shows that kids who read by end of third grade graduate, and the ones who don't read, don't graduate."

The Michigan Department of Education this month is launching a statewide literacy initiative, trying to replicate the success of similar initiatives in Massachusetts and Kentucky. The initiative is aimed at developing a pre-K to adult statewide literacy strategy.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Mike Flanagan said the *Early Warning* report is a clear call to improve reading proficiency. Michigan is working to make sure schools and teachers are prepared to meet this challenge, but education can't do it alone – it must include communities and businesses, parents and extended families, family doctors, and caregivers, he said.

"We all have a stake in this," Flanagan said. "Reading is the basic building block of a child's education. Without the ability to read, a child's chance at success in life is very limited."

The report also reinforces the need to make sure children have the support they need, starting from birth. Early childhood – ages 0 to 5 – is the most crucial learning period when 90 percent of the brain's intellectual and emotional hardwiring is set for life, said Michele Corey, director of advocacy for Michigan's Children, a partner in the release of Kids Count.

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“We can’t wait until kids show up at school already trailing their peers,” Corey said. “We instead need to build on the resources in all systems that contribute to early literacy and stop disinvesting in the programs that have been proven to make a difference.”

The report finds that nearly 40 percent of Michigan children ages 3 to 5 are not enrolled in preschool, kindergarten or nursery school. That’s 140,000 children each year who are not exposed to high quality early learning.

Michigan has cut millions of dollars in programming to schools and other services. These cuts have increased class size, closed preschools, eliminated after-school programs, ended vital mental health services, reduced access to health and child care and cut lead poisoning and infant mortality programs -- all of which help ensure that children are ready to learn and succeed.

“Michigan is moving in the wrong direction,” said Zehnder-Merrell. “We need to focus on making sure more of our children can read proficiently by the end of third grade, and we need to make sure our kids have what they need to get there.”

Among findings in the report:

- 70 percent of Michigan’s public school fourth-graders weren’t proficient in reading, compared with 68 percent nationally.
- 91 percent of Michigan’s African American fourth-graders weren’t proficient, compared with 64 percent of white fourth-graders.
- Only 15 percent of the state’s fourth-graders in low-income families were proficient, compared with 40 percent in higher-income families, a gap of 25 percentage points.

Kids Count in Michigan is a collaboration of the Michigan League for Human Services, a nonprofit, nonpartisan statewide advocacy group for low-income families, and Michigan’s Children, a nonprofit voice for children and families in Michigan. It is part of a national effort to measure the well-being of children at state and local levels. The state project is supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation of Baltimore, The Skillman Foundation of Detroit, the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation, and the Michigan Association of United Ways.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. The report and more Michigan data can be found at www.aecf.org.