

Draft



Open a Book. Close the Gap. The Case for Reading. A Call to Action.

Author: Jamie Garwood

The future of our workforce and economic stability of our community, and nation, rests in the small hands of children. They are our future workers, CEOs, leaders, philanthropists, citizens, and parents. How they are prepared to fulfill these roles rests solely in our hands.

A competitive and educated workforce will fuel our region's economic prosperity. The Northeast Indiana Corporate Council has identified a skilled workforce as the number one driver of new business expansion. Producing this skilled workforce will require community partners to promote educational excellence and tear down historic barriers to student achievement. We must improve the rigor and relevance of our educational system at the same time we ensure all students have the tools they need for success. High standards are necessary, but cannot fix the underlying social conditions that keep many students from succeeding.

Statewide, about 24% of all students will not graduate from high school in four years, with the figure rising to over 40% for low income students. In Allen County, about 35% of low-income students will not graduate (EACS: 34.5%, FWCS: 35.3%). Conversely, among higher-income students, the rates among all districts are comparable (EACS: 84.6%, FWCS: 86.9%, NACS: 93.5%, SACS: 92.3%). The dropout rate for low-income students becomes a determinate point in the cycle of poverty. With limited job opportunities, high school dropouts are twice as likely to slip into poverty. Nationally, 4 out of 10 dropouts will receive public assistance (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2001). Ultimately, they will become low-income parents themselves, unable to provide the resources or support necessary to break the cycle of poverty for their own children.

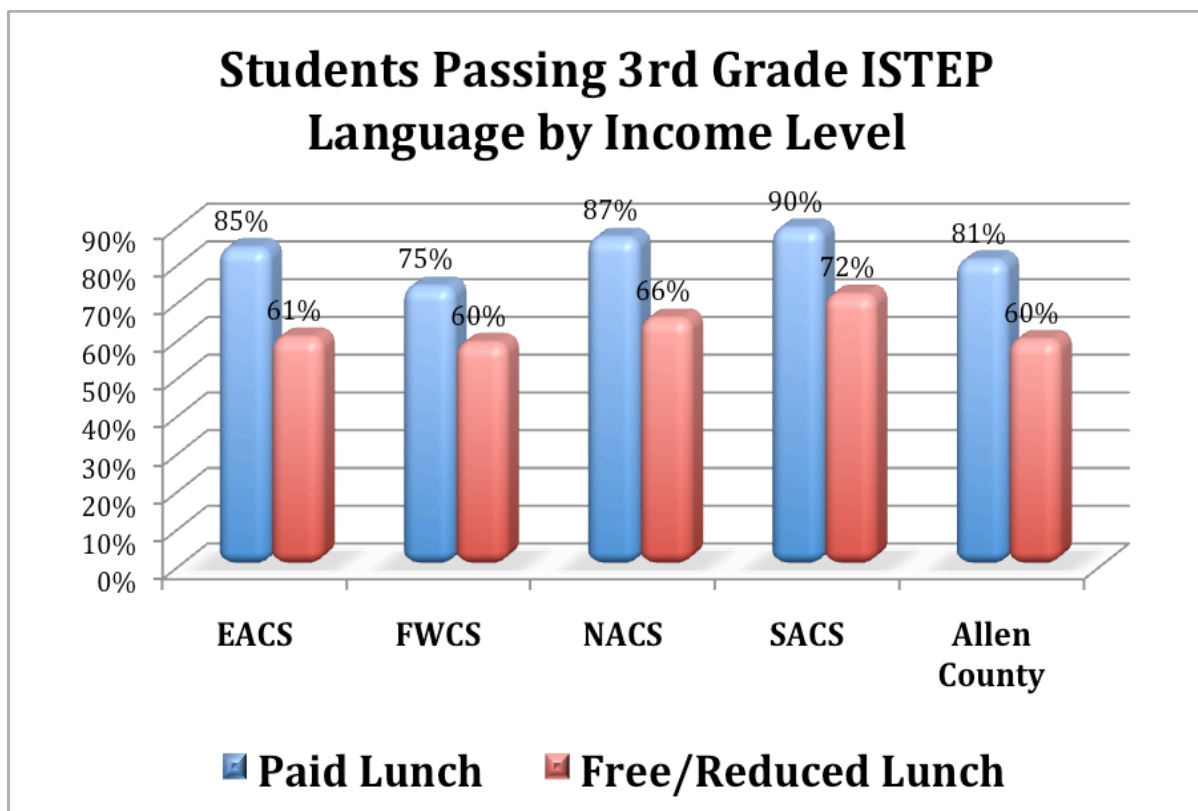
Long before students dropped out or adults became part of poverty statistics, they were likely children struggling to read. By high school, students at risk of dropping out are already well behind. One third of students entering ninth grade need extra help in reading and a fourth of all high school students are reading at "below basic" levels (Steinberg & Almeida; 2004). Unable to read well, they fall further and further behind, ultimately falling through the cracks in our culture. They are among the 1 million students who drop out each year, costing our nation over \$240 billion in lost earnings, forgone tax revenue, and increased welfare expenditures. These are costly consequences for communities and individuals. In fact, the most expensive burden we place on our society is those students we've failed to help read well (Fielding, Kerr, Rosier, 1998).

Reading is the skill required to learn in school and the skill related to 85% of all adult employment. Poor literacy development has lifelong implications for children and for communities. Those who cannot read become the largest identifiable group of those we incarcerate, and to whom we provide public assistance, housing, medical and social services (Fielding, Kerr, Rosier, 1998).

The economic consequences of illiteracy are profound. American businesses spend more than \$60 billion annually on employee training, much of that for remedial reading, writing, and mathematics. Fifty percent of all adults in correctional institutions cannot read or write at all. Annual health care costs in the U.S. are four times higher for individuals with low literacy skills (Pro Literacy Worldwide), and among adults at the lowest level of literacy proficiency, 43% live in poverty (Fielding, Kerr, Rosier, 1998). The cost to society is substantial, but the cost of unrealized potential for an individual is immeasurable.

Illiteracy is not born of laziness or disinterest. Its roots are planted early in life, and for illiterate adults, third grade was likely their last chance at literacy. Through third grade, children are learning to read. After third grade, they are reading to learn. When students cannot read by the end of third grade, an alarming 74% never catch up. “They are effectively banished to the fringes of our information society by age nine (Fielding, Kerr, Rosier, 1998; 6).” Their social and economic destiny has been defined by words they cannot read.

In Allen County, 40% of low-income third-graders are not passing the language portion of ISTEP, and almost 20% of middle-to-higher-income students are not passing. In total, more than 1,100 third-graders are missing this important gateway to future learning and life opportunities. The majority of these students will never catch up. For each year we allow the literacy door to close on 1,100 children, we are adding thousands to our future welfare rolls, prison populations, and perpetuating a cycle of poverty for thousands of families.



When Reading Begins

Teaching children to read cannot rest solely on our education system. Learning to read starts well before kindergarten, and issues related to poverty are well beyond the control of schools.

The two most significant, and related, factors in predicting academic success are: a mother's educational attainment and household income. In Allen County, 36% of babies are born to single moms, and a staggering 69% will live in poverty. Born into a life of limited resources, these children already face barriers to literacy development. They were more likely to have been born premature or at a low birth weight due to late prenatal care. They typically have fewer books in their home, attend poor quality childcare, and have a mother with limited education.

Improving literacy must start with improving birth outcomes. One in every eight babies in Allen County is born premature, and 50% will require special education upon entering school. This translates into 300 children entering school each year requiring costly special education programs. Women with the poorest birth outcomes are often the poorest in our community: single mothers, those with low levels of education, teen mothers, and African American mothers. Only 68% of African American women obtain first trimester prenatal care, compared to 82% of white women, making them twice as likely to have low birth weight babies (Indiana Department of Health; 2007).

Many low-income children also lack rich literacy environments in which to thrive. A widely cited study of low-income neighborhoods showed the ratio of books was 1 per every 300 children, compared to 13 books per child in middle-to-high-income neighborhoods. Over 80% of preschool and after-school programs serving low-income children have no age appropriate books (Neuman; 2001:3). The result: upon entering kindergarten, children from "literacy rich" homes have a 10,000-word vocabulary; children from "literacy poor" homes know only 800 (Neuman & Dickinson; 2006).

Not only do low-income families struggle to provide enriching literacy environments for their children, they also struggle to provide the most basic needs for their families. Financial instability will cause many of these children to move multiple times during their formative early years. Many will even face hunger. In households using food banks in Allen County, 37% are single parents, 27% of whom have one or more children under the age of five. Hunger is not just a symptom of poverty; it is a condition that severely impacts the cognitive and social development of children. It interferes with the learning process, reduces attention span and increases absences due to poor health.

With fewer books in their homes, poor prenatal care, and parents who may have limited literacy skills themselves, many children in poverty start school already one year behind.

Earn What You Learn

When children enter school not ready to learn, they face significant social and academic deficits leading to later educational and employment challenges. As students fall further and further behind, their opportunities diminish. After years of struggle, millions will drop out when catching up seems out of reach.

Today's complex economy demands a higher level of education. As education increases, individual earnings rise. The U.S. median income for those without a high school education is \$24,721; for those with an associate's degree, income rises to \$41,475.

The average annual salary for workers with at least a high school diploma or GED is at least 76% lower than those with bachelor's degrees (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys, 2007). Ultimately, a lower-educated workforce produces both lower personal earnings and weakens the state's economy. If only 10,000 more students a year earned college degrees, \$250 million would be added to Indiana's economy (U.S. Census Bureau; 2002).

Today's students must possess skills for a rapidly changing "knowledge-based" economy. Many Allen County students are not prepared for an increasingly competitive global market. Without a core foundation in reading, "knowledge economy" skills cannot develop.

Even if these students pursue higher education, they are more likely to require remedial coursework and are less likely to graduate. About 41% of college freshmen need remedial courses (NCES; 2004). Only 45% of students taking one remedial course complete a bachelor's degree, and just 18% taking three or more remedial courses end up graduating (American Diploma Project, from NCES, 1998).

The more remedial work required, the less likely students will graduate. Additionally, the cost of remedial education is considerable for colleges and universities. Mackinac Center for Public Policy estimates that remedial higher education can cost a state nearly \$100 million.

Students from low-income backgrounds have an especially difficult time reaching these higher levels of income and breaking the oppressive cycle of poverty. Even high-achieving low-income students are less likely to earn a college degree than low-performing higher-income students. In Indiana, only 17% of low-income students enroll in college. Of those, only one-third will earn a bachelor's degree. (Education Commission of the States, 2003)

Ultimately, those born into poverty face a daunting path to achieving intellectual and economic freedom. The barriers of their early childhood are often too great to overcome.

A Call to Action

United Way of Allen County will combine and focus its fundraising, community-building, funding and convening capabilities to raise the level of educational attainment for Allen County residents.

Our first goal will be to ensure all children can read at grade level by the end of third grade. United Way will focus on increasing access to first trimester prenatal care, improving early literacy skills, and supporting school age children in improving reading levels.

These strategies build on United Way's existing work and roles. United Way of Allen County is already invested and engaged in prenatal care, quality early childhood education, improved kindergarten transition, parent engagement, and tutoring/mentoring programs for youth. By

focusing our resources on a clear and critical goal, United Way can achieve lasting change in our community.

We will expand our role by increasing access to first trimester prenatal care, improving early literacy awareness and resources, and assisting struggling readers with positive, supportive mentors.

United Way of Allen County will also work to create a culture of literacy in Allen County. We will advocate for shared responsibility in educating and supporting Allen County students.

All Children in Allen County will read at grade level by the end of 3rd grade.

	Decrease preterm birth rates in Allen County	Children enter school with age appropriate literacy skills	Children read at grade level by the end of 3 rd grade
Current UW Investments	Program funding for prenatal health care	Program funding for accredited childcare programs Kindergarten transition project	Program funding for after-school and in-school mentoring/tutoring programs
Enhancing our Role	Launch public awareness campaign around the importance of early prenatal care Guarantee access to first trimester care	Increase access to books Engage adults in supporting early literacy Support the transition of children into kindergarten	Provide trained in-school tutors for struggling readers

References

Adams, G.C., Poersch, N.O. Key Facts About Child Care & Early Education: A Briefing Book. Washington, D.C: Children's Defense Fund, 1997, p. 16.

American Diploma Project, from NCES, 1998 ; Cited by Indiana Education Roundtable

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2001

Education Commission of the States (2003, October). Closing the college participation gap: A national summary.

Fielding, L., Kerr, N. & Rosier, P. (1998). The 90% Reading Goal. The New Foundation Press First Book. "Literacy in the US." www.firstbook.org

Indiana State Department of Education; data source for graduation rates and ISTEP achievement

Indiana State Department of Health. Indiana Maternal and Child Health Outcomes and Performance Measures Data Book; 2007.

Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2000

NCES, *Condition of Education, 2004*, June 2004 (1992 12th graders who enrolled in college).

Neuman, Susan B. and David K. Dickinson, ed. Handbook of Early Literacy Research, Volume 2. New York, NY: 2006, p. 31.

Neuman, Susan B., et al. Access for All: Closing the Book Gap for Children in Early Education. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2001, p. 3.

ProLiteracy Worldwide, www.proliteracy.org. Information compiled by ProLiteracy from several resources including: the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Census Bureau, National Association of Manufacturers, Alliance for Excellent Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment on Literacy Survey, UNESCO, and the World Education Organization.

Steinberg, Adria and Almeida, Cheryl. The Dropout Crisis: Promising Approaches in Prevention and Recovery; 2004.

Tufts University School of Nutrition Science and Policy. [The Links Between Nutrition and Cognitive Development of Children](#), 1998.

U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys, 2007 Annual Social and Economic Supplement

<http://www.centeronhunger.org/pdf/ConsequencesofHunger.pdf>