

Study Links Third Grade Reading, Poverty and High School Graduation

A national study released in April of 2011, shows that students who do not read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave high school without a diploma than proficient readers. Poverty compounds the problem: Students who have lived in poverty are four times more likely to drop out or fail to graduate on time than their more affluent peers.

The study, ["Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation,"](#) found:

- One in six children who are not reading proficiently by the third grade does not graduate from high school on time; a rate four times greater than that of proficient readers.
- The rates are highest for the low, below-basic readers: 23 percent of these children drop out or fail to finish high school on time, compared to nine percent of children with basic reading skills and four percent of proficient readers.
- Overall, 22 percent of children who have lived in poverty do not graduate from high school, compared to six percent of those who have never been poor. This rises to 32 percent for students spending more than half of the survey time in poverty.
- For children who were poor for at least a year *and* were not reading proficiently in third grade, the proportion of those who don't finish school rose to 26 percent. The rate was highest for poor black and Hispanic students, at 31 and 33 percent respectively. Even so, the majority of students who fail to graduate are white.
- Among poor children who were proficient readers in third grade, 11 percent still didn't finish high school. That compares to nine percent of subpar third graders who were never poor.

- Among children who never lived in poverty, all but two percent of the best third-grade readers graduated from high school on time.

The longitudinal study was conducted by Donald J. Hernandez, a professor of sociology at Hunter College and the Graduate Center at City University of New York, and a senior advisor to the Foundation for Child Development. It was commissioned by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The study confirms the link between third grade scores and high school graduation and, for the first time, breaks down the likelihood of graduation by different reading skill levels and poverty experiences.

“These findings suggest we need to work in three arenas: improving the schools where these children are learning to read, helping families weighed down by poverty, and encouraging better federal, state and local policy to improve the lot of both schools and families,” said Hernandez.

The report recommends aligning quality early education programs with the curriculum and standards in the primary grades; paying better attention to health and developmental needs of young children; and providing work training and other programs that will help lift families out of poverty.

Source: The Hatcher Group; Annie E. Casey Foundation