

**Kentucky Board of Education  
April 11, 2018  
Report from the Secretary  
Education and Workforce Development Cabinet**

**Who Owns These Numbers for Children**

A milestone in children's education is the transition from learning to read to reading to learn. The exact age is variable, but most agree that exiting third graders who cannot read are on a dangerous slope that can lead to dropping out of school and other poor life choices that lead to a life of poverty.

In the spring of 2017, 6,900 third graders (excluding English language learners) in Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) took the annual state achievement test for reading. A startling 32 of every 100 students – or 2,200 total – scored at the novice level, the very lowest of the state's four achievement levels. According to the Kentucky Department of Education's descriptions of K-PREP achievement levels, a third grader scoring at the novice level is not yet able to answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, recognize a text's main idea or theme, identify a character's motivations, sequence events based on minimal context information, or summarize or make inferences from a text.

By comparison, for the state outside Jefferson County, 20 of every 100 students scored at the novice level.

By further comparison, states with comprehensive K-3 reading policies that include screening, intensive intervention for struggling readers and a promotion threshold for third graders, have made double-digit gains in reading proficiency. Ohio, for example is now reporting about 12 of every 100 students in their lowest achievement level.

Of the representative 32 students in JCPS scoring at the novice level, 28 were children in low-income families while only 4 were from higher income families.

So why can't 32 out of 100 third graders in JCPS read? The numbers reflect a district that despite a budget among the very highest in the state, is home to 17 of the state's 25 lowest performing elementary schools. And sadly, for older students, JCPS's high school drop-out rate is more than double the state average.

What can be done about this? If a basic goal of primary education is to have every student entering fourth grade read at an apprentice level or above, then who owns Jefferson County's reading proficiency failure?

How can education outcomes in Jefferson County be significantly improved?

Let's make a list.

The primary responsibility for raising children lies with the parent. Parents of all income levels want the best for their children. Higher income families can choose schools that best meet the needs of their child and in some areas of the county, 40% of the families choose private education. The education options for low-income families are often limited to lower-performing JCPS schools.

Certainly, the JCPS superintendent should own these troubling numbers for children under their watch. Although the newly appointed superintendent has a history of concern for underachieving children, the previous superintendent approached the job as if the school board was in complete control of the district and the superintendent's job was only to carry out the board's direction.

The local board however, operates as an arm of the state, which has the constitutional responsibility to educate the children of the Commonwealth. The chief state school official is the Commissioner of Education and the Commissioner serves at the pleasure of the Kentucky Board of Education.

In other words, as the Kentucky Board of Education, you are responsible for finding and insisting on a new direction for the 2,200 third graders in Jefferson County who cannot read. These families look ultimately to you for an education preparing their child for life - a life in which they can use their God given abilities to the fullest.

Year after year the numbers of children taught using the same inadequate approaches and strategies stays the same. We continue to wait for someone or something to make a significant difference for the thousands of children from low-income families in the state's largest district who cannot read – a district whose consistent low achievement has dragged Kentucky's national ranking down each year, and a district with the resources and potential to be great.

I am asking you, members of the Kentucky Board of Education, to break the cycle of education complacency that is threatening our children's future – the future of our Commonwealth. Other states have purposely set an inflection point to a new steeply sloping achievement line with innovative frameworks that meet the differing needs of children.

We must break the cycle of summer regression, provide for the physical, social and emotional needs of the child, and build extended instructional and catch-up time schedules. We must expand the context of life through which children view their future potential. These are the characteristics of the best schools. When teachers have these expanded frameworks available to them, the academic bell curves for all children mirror the achievement of children from higher income families. The achievement line can be moved upward in Jefferson County.

Next month, and each May for the remainder of your term, thousands of third graders at JCPS will advance to fourth grade. Whether they are prepared or not, largely depends on you.